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Abstract

During the French Revolution of 1789, French citizens fought to abolish the ancient order of kings and aristocrats in order to establish the First Republic, a new regime founded upon liberty, equality, and fraternity. A vital instrument of this effort was a radical lawyer, Maximilien Robespierre. He often exhibited self-contradictory behavior as he assumed whatever role necessary to guide France in its path to democracy. Generally, historians depict Robespierre as either a tyrant who exercised unchecked violence, or as a hero of the Republic who epitomized democratic values. The goal of this study is to challenge these binary interpretations by presenting a spectrum of Robespierre's identities as a dictator, democrat, utopian, and lawyer. This nuanced perspective on a historical subject will reveal that truth and justice have many versions, and it responds to the ongoing inquiry: who was Maximilien Robespierre?

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Who was Maximilien Robespierre?

by

Maria Ellerese Topacio

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The report of the investigation undertaken as a
Senior Thesis, to carry two courses of credit in
the Department of History

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ABSTRACT

During the French Revolution of 1789, French citizens fought to abolish the ancient order of kings and aristocrats in order to establish the First Republic, a new regime founded upon liberty, equality, and fraternity. A vital instrument of this effort was a radical lawyer, Maximilien Robespierre. He often exhibited self-contradictory behavior as he assumed whatever role necessary to guide France in its path to democracy. Generally, historians depict Robespierre as either a tyrant who exercised unchecked violence, or as a hero of the Republic who epitomized democratic values. The goal of this study is to challenge these binary interpretations by presenting a spectrum of Robespierre's identities as a dictator, democrat, utopian, and lawyer. This nuanced perspective on a historical subject will reveal that truth and justice have many versions, and it responds to the ongoing inquiry: who was Maximilien Robespierre?

To

All my dearest teachers, friends, and family who have been essential in my educational journey from the first day of kindergarten to college graduation, and who have encouraged me to always be kind, aim high, and stay genuine.

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Introduction

I was drawn to write on some aspect of the French Revolution because it represented the rebirth of a major western European nation. Indeed, the Revolution of 1789 is remembered for its violent upheaval of an ancient system of absolutism, but it is first and foremost marked as the modern awakening of democracy in which individuals seized control of the trajectory of their lives in the social, political, economic, and legal spheres. This distinctly strayed from the traditional social hierarchies where privileges and wealth were predominantly dispensed by either divine- or blood-right. The longest reigning monarch in French history, Louis XIV, expressed the following axiom: “*L’État c’est à moi* [I am the state].”¹ For seventy-two years from 1643–1714, the “Sun King” embodied royal absolutism, opulence, and luxury. Residing in his extravagant, divine residence at Versailles, he felt that he represented the luster of the whole French nation. Yet for those who did not belong in the ranks of high priests or generational aristocrats, the standard of living was at the capricious mercy of the irregular administrations of the royal branches. Louis XIV regarded himself as the incarnation of France, but the masses consisting of peasants and the rising force of the middle class, broke the chains of containment and rationalized the idea that the best type of representation of France can only be achieved through the expression of their collective will. The illegitimacy of this order, the Old Regime, was called to attention as radical thinkers guided the population into recognizing the mechanisms that stifle their own upward mobility. The prospect of studying the tension between authority versus individual, freedom versus restraint, complacency versus agency, and enlightenment versus ignorance has always intrigued me. And not many events can match the magnitude of the French

¹ Herbert H. Rowen, “*L’État C’est à Moi*: Louis XIV and the State.” *French Historical Studies* 2, no. 1 (1961): 83–98.

Revolution.

It comes to no surprise that it became a heavily studied subject. Eric Hobsbawm, a British Marxist historian, commended the French Revolution for designing the blueprint of liberal and radical-democratic politics we are familiar with today. Its impact extends “to the point where a tricolor of some kind became the emblem of virtually every emerging nation, and European (or indeed world) politics between 1789 and 1917 were largely the struggle for and against the principles of 1789.”² Throughout this composition, the reader will find that the implications of a single historical event are far-reaching and timeless; what occurred over two centuries ago continue to reverberate in contemporary scholarship. What is inevitable is its transformation of meaning through time as the interested audience evolves. Hobsbawm, along with a consortium of other French Revolution scholars, had developed intricate theories and insights about the Revolution that have led them to create extensive grand narratives already accepted by academia. To attempt to formulate a novel theory about the Revolution was a formidable task that required intense creativity and an immense amount of time. I elected to study a figure that fully embodies the spirit and values of the Revolution. The young, idealistic lawyer and radical leader of the French Revolution named Maximilien Robespierre was an alluring candidate.

Maximilien Robespierre is indisputably a dominant figure of the French Revolution. Yet, for over two centuries historians have quarreled over what exactly he should be remembered for. Most scholars are impressed by his unwavering vision to provide France a government whose foundation rested upon the triumvirate virtues of liberty, equality, and brotherhood, the first time these values permeated the fabric of French institutions.

² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962), 74.

According to historian Albert Soboul,

From 1789. . . Robespierre was a defender of democracy. He was not simply content to defend the Revolution against the privileged classes and to demand the liberation of all the oppressed. . . . This determination to be on the side of the people . . . made him into an enemy of the monarchy and of all modifications of the principle of equality.³

In this noble light, Robespierre's legacy is that of a Republican hero serving as the most effective tool in aiding France in its transition from an absolute monarchic state to a popular democracy. On the other hand, the mention of Robespierre can spark haunted memories of the Reign of Terror, an event that released a torrent of excessive violence to purge any and all elements of the Old Regime, the social order that preceded the first French Republic.

Patrice Higonnet, who has written numerous accounts on French history, notes that "From late 1793 to July 1794 terror increasingly became the Jacobins' chief means of government Jacobin terror swelled unchecked . . . at the united prompting of Robespierre, Couthon, and Barère[.]"⁴ Historian R. R. Palmer wrote in his seminal book *Twelve Who Ruled* that Robespierre's "narrow way led to a stone wall. Spokesman of democracy he could be. . . but builder of a political society he could not be, because his character. . . made him, in actual practice, exclusive and sectarian. The chasms in the new France were not to be bridged by Robespierre. . . ."⁵ In these perspectives, historians design Robespierre's legacy as a ruthless, blood-seeking tyrant who only used the facade of democracy to enchant the citizens, secure superior power in office, and ultimately force his will upon France. Association with violence, terror, exclusiveness, and intolerance for views diverse from his own largely

³ Albert Soboul, "Robespierre and the Popular Movement of 1792–94," *Past and Present* 5 (May 1954): 55.

⁴ Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 51–52.

⁵ R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 334.

characterize the persona of Robespierre most historians label as a dictator.

It is fascinating how one man has the effect of eliciting both light and dark legacies: The Republic hero versus the bigoted dictator. Unfortunately, these light and dark depictions provide an incomplete portrait of Robespierre. As contemporary historian David Andress asserts, “Robespierre can be viewed through almost any lens, and can appear as everything from inhuman tyrant to tragic hero.”⁶ Robespierre could be depicted as a hero or villain in the backdrop of Western democracy. These binary interpretations can be problematic because it imprisons historical subjects such as Robespierre to a lasting identity that fails to incorporate the nuances of his complex character. Peter McPhee states that “people rush to vilify [Robespierre] as much as he had been lionized while alive and projected onto him actions and motives based on rumor or their own guilt.”⁷ Ruth Scurr notes that “evidence about Robespierre’s life is a mass of personal, political, historical, and literary detail, some robust, some not, to be arranged on either side of the argument, for or against: you can tell the story one way, or you can tell it another, as any lawyer knows.”⁸ McPhee and Scurr share the perspective that historical figures are subjected to the whims of their interpreter. Both historians’ viewpoint also finely aligns with the underlying philosophy of what is known as the Rashomon Effect, which holds that the same event can be described in significantly different ways by the people involved.⁹

The judgment of Robespierre’s role in the Revolution could be simplified into three camps of historians: admirers, detractors, and conciliators. Admirers of Robespierre, such as

⁶ David Andress, “Living the Revolutionary Melodrama: Robespierre’s Sensibility and the Construction of Political Commitment in the French Revolution,” *Representations* 114, no. 1 (2011): 104–5.

⁷ Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), xvi.

⁸ Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution* (New York: Metropolitan, 2007), 9.

⁹ Akira Kurosawa, *Rashomon*, [film script], ed. Donald Richie (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 13.

George Rudé, label him as an unimpeachable man of unwavering dedication to virtuous, democratic goals. Detractors, such as R. R. Palmer, depict him as a blood-thirsty charlatan only showing allegiance to himself. Conciliators harmonize both the virtuous and terrible side of Robespierre; they acknowledge the stark contradictions in Robespierre's personas and embrace its nuances. In this paper, I will reconcile the judgements of all three versions of Robespierre interpreters by presenting arguments for not one, but four identities which I believe fully encompasses his collective essence. The spectrum of identities — dictator, democrat, utopian, and lawyer — reveals four different versions of Robespierre. Any one of these identities can supply enough detail on its own to create a lengthy discourse on the ongoing inquiry: who is Robespierre?

Chapter I **Who was Maximilien Robespierre? The General Narrative**

Robespierre has been subjected to countless historical interpretations that inherently disable an objective view of his life. The purpose of this section is to describe the general facts of Robespierre's brief, but brave existence that most French Revolution scholars can generally agree upon. This section traces vital events that occurred during the French Revolution of 1789 as well as Robespierre's location in it as one of its principal agents. Robespierre's common narrative will be more closely analyzed in subsequent sections that expand on his spectrum of identities.

1758–1766, Adolescence: The Virtual Orphan

Maximilien Robespierre's dramatic tale begins on May 6, 1758 in the quaint, provincial town of Arras, the capital of the province Artois located in the northernmost part of France. In the 1750s, Arras's social fabric was composed of varying degrees of wealth that represented most groups in the traditional hierarchy in France.¹⁰ The Robespierre family belonged in the ranks of the upper bourgeoisie which was strengthened by the intermarriage of Maximilien's parents: François Robespierre, descendant of a long line of lawyers, and Jacqueline Carraut, a daughter of brewers and innkeepers. For five generations, the paternal side of the family serviced France as men of the law.¹¹ By no means were the Robespierres members of the nobility by blood right, but at least their legal milieu elevated them to serve as a bridge between privileged elites and respectable commoners.¹² However, Maximilien's parents tainted this venerable reputation by conceiving a child out of wedlock— Maximilien

¹⁰ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 1.

¹¹ J. M. Thompson, *Robespierre*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1936), vol. I, 1–4.

¹² McPhee, *Robespierre*, 7.

himself. After Maximilien's birth in 1758, his sisters and little brother followed: Charlotte (b. 1760) and Henriette (b.1761), and Augustin (b. 1763), respectively.¹³

Hopes to construct a healthy family unit dissipated upon the early death of Maximilien's mother in 1764 when she suffered birth-related complications after conceiving her fifth child, who had also passed away. Their father François, erratic and heartbroken, failed to sign the registration for his wife's death and refused to even attend her funeral.¹⁴ His irreparable grief prompted him to halt his legal practice and only sporadically supervise his four surviving children until he completely abandoned them in 1766. Consequently, Maximilien was left as a virtual orphan by the age of eight, and he and his three siblings were dispersed among various extended family members.¹⁵

1766–1781, The Student of the Classics and the Enlightenment

At the age of eight, Robespierre had taught himself how to read and write without the support of tutors. Between 1766–1769, he attended primary school at the College of Arras, a church school administered by secular priests known as the Oratorians.¹⁶ This Christian-focused order rivalled the Jesuits in spreading knowledge across Western European pupils. Instead of a heavy religious-based curriculum though, the Oratorians stressed the importance of history, world geography, and classical studies, thus initiating Robespierre's avid training in Latin and other ancient Greco-Roman productions. In fact, Robespierre's ability to speak and read Latin was so admirable that he secured a scholarship to the elite College of Louis-le-Grand of the University of Paris at the age of eleven in 1769.

¹³ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 2.

¹⁴ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 4–5.

¹⁶ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 11.

Matriculation at the College marked Robespierre's first voyage to Paris. Robespierre was exposed to the revolutionary works of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The publication of Rousseau's treatises *Émile* and the *Social Contract* in 1762 challenged the validity of existing established orders, a common theme among philosophers of the Enlightenment. Rousseau encouraged the restoration of mankind's innocence by withdrawing from formal education and adopting a more self-reflective approach to learning. Rousseau insisted that men are inherently good, but the imposition of social constructs render them corrupt and wicked. Moreover, he declared Christianity as an original source of public disorder.¹⁷ Conservative clergymen and nobles condemned Rousseau's inflammatory materials; however, Robespierre had already imbibed them. Comparatively, Robespierre was one of the poorest boys at the school, yet poverty did not dissuade him from displaying his wealthy merits. By 1775, Robespierre was the top classical scholar of his class of five hundred pupils.¹⁸ Accordingly, he was selected to deliver a speech in Latin to welcome the newly-coronated King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette—the royal heads he would vouch to be guillotined sixteen years later.¹⁹

In 1781, Robespierre graduated from the illustrious College of Louis-le-Grand with a law degree. As a token of the College's gratitude for Robespierre's academic excellence, they compensated him 600 *livres*, the equivalent of a year's living allowance.²⁰ He registered as an *avocat* or barrister in the *Parlement* of Paris, the most superior court in France.²¹ Robespierre returned to his hometown of Arras where he was nominally prepared to launch his career as

¹⁷ William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 53.

¹⁸ McPhee *Robespierre*, 11.

¹⁹ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I. 6-9.

²⁰ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 26.

²¹ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 26.

a provincial lawyer. Arras stood as a major commercial center with a largely conservative-minded social structure that banked on aristocratic privileges and *seigneurialism*. Clergymen and nobles benefitted most from this system, drawing wealth from seigneurial dues, or property and land fees, owed to them by impoverished tenant-peasants.²² The Church and nobility were tax-exempt on almost every economic aspect of society; therefore, the peasants suffered the brunt of the taxation system. In Robespierre's first year as a practicing lawyer, he typically catered struggling commoners who faced systematic hardships such as severe taxation. In his busiest year, he had twenty-four briefs and made twenty-five appearances in court.²³ Soon thereafter, Robespierre took the mantle of the "people's lawyer," earning him the enmity of long-established lawyers in Arras who have waited decades to acquire that degree of reputation. His enthusiasm for justice was then recognized by the Bishop's Court, one of nine courts within the jurisdiction of Arras. During this judgeship, Robespierre was forced to sentence a murderer to death, an act that greatly affected him. His sister Charlotte remarked that he had not eaten anything for two days after condemning a man to death.²⁴

When Robespierre was not defending downtrodden folks, he joined local literary clubs, submitted essays to academic contests, and overall ornamented his intellectual repertoire by associating himself with established elite societies. He joined the debating society called The *Rosati*, or the Club of Roses, where he also found a venue to express poetry. Moreover, he submitted essays to literary competitions and won himself top prizes at academies. The subject of these prized essays gravitated around the dignity of the individual in a world of corrupt temptations. In one of his essays, he pulled ideas from Enlightenment

²² McPhee, *Robespierre*, 30.

²³ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

thinker, Baron de Montesquieu's book *The Spirit of the Laws*, to argue that distinctions based on political identity breed unnecessary vanity that injure individual dignity. His relevant opinions granted him a seat in the Royal Academy of Arras in 1784, an assembly of the city's most brilliant brains. In 1789, as the dawn of the Revolution began to crystallize, Robespierre published his first political manifesto titled *Appeal to the Artesian Nation* which called for equal representation of the people in the royal government.²⁵

1789, Political Career in Paris, Estates-General, and the Jacobin Club

By 1789, France was reeling under the reign of King Louis XVI as the entire kingdom suffered from harvest failures, high unemployment, and overall financial distress.²⁶ In order to address these concerns, Louis XVI enacted a royal edict to summon the Estates-General for the first time in over a century. The Estates-General comprised of three total estates, or social orders: clergy, nobility, and commoners. The traditional voting procedure at the Estates-General was one vote per Estate, even if the Third Estate comprised ninety-five percent of the population.²⁷ This became a situation in which the First and Second Estates would outvote the Third on any reforms that suggest political and social equality. In 1789, the duty of each order was to compile a list of *cahiers*, or grievances they plan to submit to the king for redress. In April of 1789, Robespierre was elected as one of eight deputies to represent his province of Artois of the Third Estate.²⁸ When he flocked to Versailles, he joined the new political club, Society of the Friends of the Constitution, more commonly

²⁵ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 21.

²⁶ Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution from its Origins to 1793*, trans. Elizabeth Moss Evanson (London: Routledge, 1962), 116–118.

²⁷ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, 82.

²⁸ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 44.

known as the Jacobin Club. Robespierre's affiliation with the Jacobins granted him a support system of like-minded, ambitious individuals who pushed for the revolutionary cause.²⁹

The National Assembly

Tensions over voting procedures reached its climax when the Third Estate demanded that votes be counted by head, not by order.³⁰ Louis XVI put the matter to debate, but with the complicity of the upper Estates, he managed to delay the issue until late summer. On June 17, 1789, the commoners refused to be relegated as third rank, so they severed ties with the ancient system, and thereby established themselves as an autonomous government referred to as the National Assembly.³¹ Government bodies were frequently altered throughout the course of the Revolution; the National Assembly existed from 1789–1791. Robespierre was appointed as one of its representatives. Most of the representatives were lawyers and members of the upper bourgeoisie. On June 20, members of the Third Estate took the Tennis Court Oath, a situation where they locked themselves up in a handball court in Versailles and could not adjourn until they drafted a constitution for France.³² Robespierre was the forty-fifth signatory of the Oath; he even made an appearance in Jacques Louis David's symbolic painting of the scene.³³ Moreover, on August 26, 1789, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen codified the French citizens' wish to be governed with respect to their natural rights to life, liberty, and happiness. It also served

²⁹ Jean Matrat, *Robespierre: Or the Tyranny of the Majority* (New York: Scriber, 1971), 77–79.

³⁰ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 102.

³¹ Lefebvre, *The French Revolution*, 110–11.

³² Richard Cobb, *The Voices of the French Revolution*, ed. Colin Jones (Topsfield, MA: Salem House Publishers, 1988), 60–61.

³³ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol I, 53.

as the preamble to the first French constitution. Robespierre's contribution to the Declaration was his advocacy for freedom of speech and press.³⁴

Popular uprisings fueled the unrest. Thousands of Parisians protested food shortages and lack of economic reform as they stormed the capital. On July 14, 1789, the unruly mob marched to Bastille to seize gunpowder to equip the newly created National Guard. The Fall of the Bastille was regarded as the first day of the Revolution as heads were put on pikes and people demanded royal blood.³⁵ The National Assembly did little to mitigate the uprisings, yet Robespierre was in awe of the commoners for fighting for their freedom from oppression. From July to August of 1789, peasant revolts in the countryside heightened to a crisis titled the "Great Fear." Women expressed their rage for bread shortages and starving children during the "October Days" as they stomped towards Marie Antionette at Versailles.³⁶ During these events, Robespierre sparred with the other deputies at the Assembly who were bitter towards the uproar. Robespierre saw the people reclaiming their sovereignty.

1790–1791, Robespierre's Political Influence Gains Traction

In 1790, Robespierre continued his role as deputy in the National Assembly. No longer was he a junior speaker though. As the Assembly debated on a constitution, Robespierre offered his progressive opinion on a variety of topics. He championed for civil rights to be afforded to marginalized groups in French society. In the arena of the penal system, he opposed repressive punitive measures against peasant riots. On the topic of the monarch's executive powers, he opposed the king's right to declare war and veto legislation.

³⁴ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 188.

³⁵ Cobb and Jones, *Voices of the French Revolution*, 60–61.

³⁶ Lefebvre, *The French Revolution*, 132.

Regarding the church, he supported clerical marriage.³⁷ On March 31, 1791, the Jacobin Club elected Robespierre as its president. During this time, Robespierre motioned for the “self-denying” ordinance, which barred any existing member of the outgoing National Assembly to campaign for a seat on the incoming Legislative Assembly.³⁸ The motion passed unanimously, thereby preventing Robespierre himself to seek re-election; however, he retained his political platform as main speaker of the Jacobin Club. Additionally, on June 10, he was elected as Public Prosecutor of Paris, which he resigned quite quickly due to its exhausting agenda. Ten days later, King Louis XVI and his family attempted to flee Paris in order to reclaim their crown from the clutches of constitutionalism. Disguised as ragged commoners, their attempt to flee the tumultuous regime was halted when they were captured at Varennes. The very next day on June 21, Robespierre conducted a speech that called for the deposition of the king for committing treason against his own country. On July 20, the Brunswick Manifesto, initiated by the Duke of Brunswick, Charles William Ferdinand of Austria was prepared to help Louis XVI reclaim his crown. The proclamation was simple: if the French people harmed the king and his sovereignty, Austria will burn Paris down.³⁹ In December 1791, Robespierre conducted speeches to oppose war with foreigners; yet his efforts fell short once the Legislative Assembly preemptively declared war on Austria on April 20, 1792.

³⁷ George Rudé, *Robespierre: Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 99, 217, 218.

³⁸ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 134–35.

³⁹ Lefebvre, *The French Revolution*, 256–57.

1792, National Convention and the First French Republic

After the issuance of the Brunswick Manifesto, Parisians were agitated rather than threatened. They stormed the Tuileries Palace to capture Louis XVI, but he escaped to take refuge at the Legislative Assembly. To appease the crowd, the Assembly voted to suspend the monarchy. King Louis XVI no longer existed; he was referred to as citizen Louis Capet. On September 21, 1792, the first French Republic was declared. The advent of a new French era stimulated the need to destroy any remnants of the Old Regime. Everything from calendars to honorific titles were revised to better assimilate a secular, scientific, and democratic Republic. Robespierre called for elections to the National Convention, an elected group of officials who would draft the new constitution of 1793 to reflect the exit of the monarch. On September 5, 1792, he was elected deputy for Paris to the National Convention. King Louis XVI was also set for trial between December 1792–January 1793 of which Robespierre championed for his summary execution.

1793, Committee of Public Safety & The Reign of Terror

On April 5, 1793, the National Convention enacted measures to address the war with Austria and Prussia as well as the internal rebellions in Paris and the provinces. Revolutionary Tribunals, expeditious judicial bodies, were set up to try suspected counterrevolutionaries. A day later, the Convention decreed the creation of the Committee of Public Safety and Committee of General Security, whose objectives lay in overseeing the Republic's security against foreign and civil foes.⁴⁰ These committees were subject to re-election each month. On July 27, 1793, Robespierre was voted into the twelve-member

⁴⁰ Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue*, 47.

Committee of Public Safety. Additionally, he was appointed president of the Convention on September 5, 1793.⁴¹ At this point, Robespierre had the most authority in France. The nation was at war, and the Committee of Public Safety was the war cabinet. 1793 was also largely the year of the Reign of Terror, a series of internal violent episodes in which counterrevolutionaries and enemies of the state were arrested, imprisoned, and executed without constitutional safeguards.⁴² With all tumultuous events, the dates and statistics of the Reign of Terror vary. Although its inauguration is generally marked on September 4–5, 1793 when Committee of Public Safety member Barère formally declared that “Terror is the order of the day.”⁴³ It fatefully concluded upon Robespierre’s death nine months afterward on July 1794. During the Reign of Terror, the general estimate of victims who were sentenced to death by guillotine usually numbers around 16,000 people.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the Terror incarcerated close to 500,000 political prisoners between March 1793 to August 1794.⁴⁵ Many of these individuals did not commit any crime; rather, they stood out as potential threats or mischief-makers against the Committee of Public Safety. On the governmental front, the purpose of the National Convention was to draft a new constitution for the Republic. Robespierre was an influential draftsman of the document. After just two weeks of debate on which principles to include in the sovereign document, the Convention accepted it in June 20, 1793 and put it up for public referendum. The results of the referendum were 1.8 million votes in support of the Constitution and 11,600 against. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen became the preamble to the Constitution of 1793 just as it did for

⁴¹ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 240–41.

⁴² David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 178–80.

⁴³ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 53.

⁴⁴ Donald Greer, *The Incidence of the Terror during the French Revolution: A Statistical Interpretation* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966), 26.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

the Constitution of 1791. On October 8, 1793, however, Robespierre supported the suspension of the Constitution which would remain in effect until the end of the Revolution.⁴⁶

1794, Ninth of Thermidor

On July 26, 1794, Robespierre appeared before the Convention with a new list of suspects whom he hinted were individuals sitting in the chamber. Representatives began to squirm out of fear that they would be the next victims of the guillotine. The deputies realized that Robespierre was too absorbed in his paranoia. Accusing him of being a tyrant, they voted to arrest Robespierre. On July 27, soldiers rushed into his hotel room firing their pistols leading to Robespierre having his left jaw shot and wounded. The next day was Robespierre's summary trial date. Placed in an open cart, he was rolled into the streets of Paris. The mob threw rocks and blurted defamatory claims at him. As he walked the steps to the guillotine, the executioner stripped him of his jacket as well as the bandages keeping his bloody jaw from shattering. At thirty-six years old and five years into the Revolution, Robespierre was executed.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 75.

⁴⁷ Friedrich Sieburg, *Robespierre: The Incorruptible*, trans. John Dilke (New York: R. M. McBride and Company, 1938), 7–12.

Chapter II Robespierre, the Liberal Democrat

In this section, I will examine the system of values and actions that define Robespierre's democratic persona and how these elements manifested themselves structurally, politically, economically, and socially. At the core of Robespierre's democratic belief system was the belief in liberty, equality, and fraternity. Liberty translates as the freedom of choice, and the standard of protecting one's life and property against undue infringement by the government or any singular entity. This coincides with the political aspect of Robespierre's role as a democrat in which he steadfastly championed for civil liberties and a constitution for all French citizens. The second ideal, equality, aligns with Robespierre's economic and social goals. Economically, he condemned the inequities that arose from the traditional and rigid social hierarchy in France. At the outbreak of the Revolution, there were twenty-million peasants, about three-quarters of the population, who suffered the burdens of food shortages and excessive taxation. Robespierre believed these inequities were due to a lack of civic education. The push for civic education ties to the demonstration of his third democratic ideal of fraternity. For a democracy to be successful, his goals as a social democrat were to curb unrepugnant vices such as greed, division, and disloyalty; he wanted a citizenry that actively contributed to the prosperity of the Republic. Robespierre said, ". . . what is the fundamental principle of popular or democratic government? . . . It is virtue[,] . . . that virtue which is nothing other than the love of the nation and its laws."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Richard Bienvu, *The Ninth of Thermidor: The Fall of Robespierre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 34–35.

Before I examine the structural, political, economic, and social exhibition of Robespierre's democratic identity, it should be noted that a democratic form of government was atypical in eighteenth-century Europe. The monarchy was the dominant government structure.⁴⁹ This was a revolutionary period in history in which the dying influence of absolute rulers was the contested outcome of the rise in demand for popular sovereignty. The Enlightenment stimulated supremely radical ideas: natural rights, the triumph of reason, and individual freedom. In 1776, the Americans successfully proved that a revolt against monarchical Britain was necessary in order to build a regime compatible with their desire for greater independence and representation in government. The French invested plenty of resources in this fight for self-determination. Besides the American War for Independence, there was no precedence for a democracy in France. Therefore, Robespierre turned to philosophers and political theorists, most notably, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to help build his democratic identity. Robespierre's challenge was embedded in the translation of abstract, theoretical frameworks to realistic policies. In Rousseau's treatise *The Social Contract* published in 1762, he theorized that a democracy was the best form of government suited to the principles of liberty and freedom.⁵⁰ He reasoned that the people's will, regarded as the General Will, is the only legitimate source of authority and it serves as the only set of interests that a government must work towards achieving. However, Rousseau rejected the idea of a democracy in a large nation like France because a direct democracy would be impossible to implement in a country that boasted over twenty-five million inhabitants in 1789. He was concerned that elected representatives would misconstrue the General Will,

⁴⁹ Lynn Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 6.

⁵⁰ Robin W. Winks and Thomas E. Kaiser, *Europe from the Old Regime to the Age of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 107–08.

and instead use the democratic electoral process to attain an influential seat in government to exercise their own self-interests.

Structurally, Robespierre agreed with Rousseau that a direct democracy was not suitable for a population as vast as France. In a speech he addressed to the National Convention in 1794, Robespierre said, “Democracy is not a state in which the people. . . regulate for themselves all public affairs.”⁵¹ Robespierre lacked confidence in a direct democracy not merely for its incompatibility with the size of France, but also because he believed that people were not fit to be their own direct policymakers. He recognized a democracy as “a state in which the sovereign people, guided by laws which are of their own making, do for themselves all that they can do well, and by their delegates do all that they cannot do for themselves.”⁵² Just like Rousseau, Robespierre insisted that people were innately good. Sovereignty resides in the masses. However, regulation was the responsibility of the delegates of the state, not the people. Robespierre understood that in order to be a leader, one must be highly educated. Wisdom was something he worked his whole life to obtain. Furthermore, Ruth Scurr asserted that “Robespierre’s vision of a democracy was very different from anything we would recognize today.” Today, most democratic nations would recognize that the majority opinion is the popular opinion, and thus the official opinion. Scurr continues to point that “the rule of the people, as [Robespierre] understood it, was not simply derived from the will of the majority. The point was to ensure the triumph of the good, pure general will. . . what the people would want in ideal circumstances[.]”⁵³ Robespierre recognized that the General Will was not always reflected in the majority opinion. Robespierre diverged from Rousseau’s idea of a democracy by emphasizing the

⁵¹ Bienvenu, *The Ninth of Thermidor*, 34.

⁵² Ibid., 34.

⁵³ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 232.

importance of the roles of legislators and other elected deputies. Rousseau advised against representatives, for their personal interests might hinder their ability to express the General Will. However, Robespierre viewed this condition as inevitable. Legislators played a decisive role in his vision of a democracy:

The first care of the legislator ought to be to fortify the principle of government. Thus, everything that tends to excite love of country, to purify morals, to elevate souls, to direct the passions of the human heart toward the public interest, ought to be adopted or established by the [legislator].⁵⁴

In his speech, he clearly asserted that a strong legislature signified a strong democracy. Being a lawyer himself, the genesis of this concept undoubtedly had a bias towards placing legalists on a pedestal. The legislator was not supposed to be an indifferent statesman. Robespierre feverishly proclaimed a legislator as a disciplinarian by using language such as “purify morals” and “elevate souls.” The guarantor of a prosperous democratic regime lay in the legislator’s judicious ability to reconcile the private passions of the people with public order.

Lastly, Robespierre’s vision of a democracy had no room for a monarch, even one that had been deposed, humiliated, and stripped of all regal authority. In 1792, when Louis XVI had proven on numerous occasions, he would not adapt to the Republican way, the National Convention had to deliberate on when he should be indicted for treason. Ferocious in spirit and rhetoric, Robespierre’s mission was to sentence Louis XVI to the guillotine without the delay of due procedure:

What penalty will we impose on Louis? . . . For myself, I abhor the death penalty . . . and I feel neither love nor hatred for Louis; I hate only his crimes. I have asked for the abolition of the death penalty . . . it can be justified only in cases where it is

⁵⁴ Bienvenu, *Ninth of Thermidor*, 35–36.

necessary to the safety of individuals or society. But Louis must die because the homeland must live.⁵⁵

Brazen and forthright, Robespierre would not spare Louis. The establishment of the Republic signifies that the title of king is obsolete. Louis “was” the king, but now he is officially recognized as a traitor and an enemy of the nation, which is a signal for Robespierre to automatically exempt him from enjoying the equal rights of citizens. He asks for the Convention to suspend Louis’s due procedural rights for the sake of expediency. If Louis goes to trial and was acquitted by uncloaked, sympathetic royalists, Robespierre predicted that democracy would die.

Politically, Robespierre’s vision of a democracy required codification of the ideas of liberty. George Rudé commented that Robespierre’s long-term goal was to “create a republic of . . . socially independent citizens. . . and [restore] by good government to their natural and inalienable rights of personal freedom, political equality, and the pursuit of happiness.”⁵⁶ Freedom, equality, and happiness were the pillars of the democracy Robespierre dreamt of. These principles were codified with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen. Inspired by the American’s Declaration of Independence, the French revolutionaries designed their own solemn declaration. Eric Hobsbawm viewed these two revolutions side-by-side and asserted that “American revolutionaries . . . who migrated to France because of their political sympathies, found themselves moderates in France.”⁵⁷ Hobsbawm recognizes how intense the Frenchmen were in their fight for liberty. Ratified by the National Assembly on August 26, 1789, the Declaration of Man became a preamble to the Constitution of 1791

⁵⁵ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 142.

⁵⁶ Rudé, *Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat*, 95–96.

⁵⁷ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, 75.

and expressed the principles of political legitimacy.⁵⁸ The document had seventeen articles: six merit special attention.

- I. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights.
- II. The purpose of all political institutions is to preserve the natural rights of man. These rights being liberty, property, security, and freedom from oppression.
- III. The law is the expression of the general will.
- IV. Every man is presumed innocent until proven guilty.
- V. Those who seek to expedite or execute arbitrary orders should be punished.
- VI. Every citizen may speak, write, and print freely.⁵⁹

The Declaration guaranteed civil liberties that Frenchman were not afforded as subjects of Louis XVI's reign. At best, Robespierre played the role of a participating deputy at the time of the Declaration's ratification. His influence as a political revolutionary was still at low ebb, up until he advanced the notion of freedom of opinion. As a deputy of the National Assembly, he most notably opposed the exclusion of "passive citizens" from participating in the electoral process. Passive citizens are distinguished as citizens who do not fulfill the property requirements for voting rights. He believed that property qualifications for deputies should not be implemented. Those who fulfilled them were known as active citizens. In a speech addressed to the National Assembly in 1789, Robespierre said:

All citizens, whoever they are, have the right to aspire to all levels of officeholding. . . . The Constitution establishes that sovereignty resides in the people . . . [E]very citizen has the right to participate in making the law and consequently that of being an elector or eligible for office without distinction of wealth.⁶⁰

Even as a man who was raised in a bourgeois environment, Robespierre understood that one's wealth should not be directly proportional to one's political rights. Robespierre

⁵⁸ Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 15.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁰ "Robespierre, 'Speech Denouncing the New Conditions of Eligibility,' 22 October 1789," *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, accessed January 16, 2020, <https://revolution.chnm.org/items/show/567>.

honored the universal code of equality because he viewed the right to vote as a fundamental right, not a privilege. Voting franchise was a topic of debate again in 1790 at the National Assembly. Robespierre opposed the plan to divide French citizens into two categories: passive versus active. Their title was given based on whether they could afford a certain threshold of taxes that was equivalent to two days' worth of labor.⁶¹ Robespierre wanted all citizens to participate in national elections regardless of their financial background. Despite his insistence for a broader franchise, the Assembly limited the right to vote to active citizens only. An estimated thirty-nine percent of male citizens were denied the right to vote due to their disadvantaged economic background.⁶² The majority opposition for a broader franchise only magnified Robespierre's progressive stance. As a minority in a group of revolutionaries, Robespierre stood out.

A second example of Robespierre's passion to reduce barriers was his fight against eligibility requirements to hold office. To qualify to run for public office, a candidate would have to pay a principal fee of fifty-three *livres*, which is ten times more than the price it takes to become an active citizen.⁶³ Using wealth as a criteria to hold public office was repulsive to Robespierre. Furthermore, it illustrated a regression to the Old Regime when the wealthy would pay for their positions in government.

Robespierre fully supported the right for people to express their individual opinions without fear of persecution. When he was a young lawyer in Arras, journalism became a channel to express his views when his oratory skills were not yet developed. In his first political manifesto, *Appeal to the Artesian Nation*, Robespierre endorsed the need for equal

⁶¹ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 117.

⁶² Ibid., 118.

⁶³ Ibid.

representation of the people in government.⁶⁴ In 1793, Robespierre articulated that “Liberty of press, that is to say, the right to publish one’s thoughts in any way, cannot be prohibited, suspended, or limited.”⁶⁵ Censorship had been a tool used by the royal government for hundreds of years before the Revolution vanquished the crown’s power to silence. It was illegal to publish any printed work such as a book, pamphlet, or newspaper, without expressed approval from an official censor.⁶⁶ Scurr describes how Robespierre searched for a “perfect liberty” where there was a “complete absence of censorship in both public and private lives.” Robespierre was even open to permitting the sale of pornographic content and other perverse kinds of entertainment which was customarily a rather peculiar attitude at the time.⁶⁷ Morally, he rejected content that expressed sinfulness and debauchery; however, it was the principle of transparency and liberty of soul he approved of. His quest for tolerance of opinion permeated to the religious sector. He was a spokesman for religious toleration. He believed that “religious faith was indispensable to an orderly, civilized society” and he “denounced the anti-religious excesses at the Jacobin Club.”⁶⁸ In a nation that was predominantly of Catholic faith, he opposed the counter-productive effects of de-Christianization. Although the Republic was making strides towards the deity of Reason rather than God, Robespierre respected everyone’s choice in faith.

Robespierre understood that the democratic ideals promised by the Declaration of Man were not reserved for white male Frenchmen. He called for these protections to include even the most outcasted and marginalized groups in French society at the time: Protestants,

⁶⁴ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 21.

⁶⁵ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. II, 39.

⁶⁶ Cobb and Jones, *Voices of the French Revolution*, 55.

⁶⁷ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 151.

⁶⁸ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 262.

Jews, actors, and black slaves in the French colonial system. Robespierre favored equality for these groups because he believed that continued exclusion was a violation of the democratic principles set forth in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. In 1794, he endorsed a decree to the National Convention that would abolish slavery in all the colonies. The decree declared “that all men, without distinction of color, residing in the colonies, are French citizens and will enjoy the rights assured by the Constitution.”⁶⁹ Robespierre led the Convention to issue this decree because it aligns with his view that all men are created equal. Robespierre’s consideration of women being granted the same rights as men was also a progressive stance. The prevalent view of women during the eighteenth century still regarded them as subordinates in a patriarchal society. The dynamics of womanhood during the Revolution could succinctly be characterized into three groups: Marie Antoinette, the militant, famished women of the peasantry, and the immersive intellectuals who tried to engineer a place for women in the Revolution’s blueprint. As a member of the Royal Academy of Arras in 1787, Robespierre proposed that women should be admitted to literary societies as well. Impressed by the “attractiveness and delicacy that distinguish that of woman,” Robespierre wanted the presence of women to “contribute to the glory and happiness of society.”⁷⁰ It was the creation of the Constitution of 1791 that convinced the Parisian masses that Robespierre was a Republican hero. Scurr commented Robespierre being the “bold spokesman for liberty and equality, the defender of the poor, an advocate of democracy, that rare and admirable thing in politics: an incorruptible man.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Hunt, *French Revolution and Human Rights*, 115.

⁷⁰ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 44–45.

⁷¹ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 172.

In the economic realm, Robespierre exhibited his democratic intentions by addressing the extreme inequities faced by the French commoners. In order for a democracy to prosper, legislators must “assure to all members of society the enjoyment of the portion of the fruits of the earth that is necessary to their existence.”⁷² In this quote, Robespierre urged for resources to be managed in a way where everyone has a portion of the share. How large the share was not disclosed, but Robespierre’s economic definition of a democracy prioritized subsistence living; every citizens’ access to resources was limited. Robespierre was not an economic expert, yet he reasoned that the financial distress was a “matter less of creating brilliant theories than of returning to first notions of good sense.”⁷³ France suffered extreme food shortages in the 18th century due to harvest failures and an outdated mercantile system that mostly benefitted large, private industries. Starvation often provoked violent bread riots. Robespierre was convinced that food shortages were man-made shortages.⁷⁴ In 1789, Robespierre did not want to mismanage the crisis like the administration of the Old Regime. His economic reforms were mainly tackled with words. Through the activation of his persuasive oratorical and penmanship skills, Robespierre vilified the wealthy in order to advocate for the poor. Just prior to his nomination as deputy to the Estates-General in 1788, he drafted a written response targeted at the conscience of a privileged crown. He inquired “Do you know why there are so many indigents?”

[It is] because you hold all the wealth in your greedy hands. . . .[It is] because you inhabit sumptuous houses to which your gold attracts everything which can serve your flabbiness and occupy your idleness. [It is] because your luxury devours the sustenance of a thousand men in a single day.⁷⁵

⁷² Robespierre, “On Subsistence Goods,” trans. Mitch Abidor, Marxist.org, February 1, 2020, <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/robespierre/1792/subsistence-goods.htm>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 51–52.

In a series of hostile claims, Robespierre censured the wealthy echelons of society for being the principal source of poverty in France. Their abundant ownership of assets violated his economic belief in subsistence living. As a man of principle, Robespierre rushed to analyze the amoral aspect of wealth. Greed, idleness, and gluttony were attributes associated with the rich. Robespierre sometimes demonized the rich in order to uplift the poor.

Defining what it meant to be a democrat preoccupied Robespierre. Without the accumulation of the efforts of Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau, Robespierre's determination to resist aristocratic privilege would not have gained traction. He would have been regarded as an ideologic outsider in a world of complicit oppression. Albert Soboul comments that the French Revolution went far beyond than imagined in its unrelenting fight for equality. "Neither in America nor in England had the accent been on equality[.]"⁷⁶ The Declaration of the Rights of Man guaranteed civic equality, but Robespierre and the Assembly pushed for social equality. Every aspect of public life needed to assimilate to the universal principals of liberty and equality. The Pope had condemned the Declaration of Rights of Man because he viewed popular sovereignty as dangerous. It also implied that people would only obey the laws they consented.⁷⁷ Robespierre believed that the path towards an egalitarian republic would only be paved once privileges of the Church, nobility, and King were dismantled and dissolved. Robespierre's role in eradicating the privileges of the Church could be witnessed in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790. The Civil Constitution's purpose was to reform the Church to better reflect popular demands of the Revolution. The most common of these demands were for the abolition of *tithes*, or taxes

⁷⁶ Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution 1787–1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon*, trans. Alan Forrest and Colin Jones (New York: Vintage House, 1975), 11.

⁷⁷ Peter McPhee, *Liberty or Death: The French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 120.

imposed by the Church, and for democratic elections of the clergy. Robespierre supported the Constitution's provisions of reducing the number of dioceses from 137 to 83, compensating the clergy through state funds rather than by *tithe*s, and having priests and bishops elected by the people. He reasoned that priests were public officials who "should be in accordance with his strict democratic principles... [and] be chosen through the pure, unmediated expression of popular will."⁷⁸ Surely, this was a concerted attempt to diminish the Pope's authority in France. Once the Pope's vice grip on France dwindles, Robespierre hopes to minimize clerical privilege and subject them to standards equal to that of commoners. In an incendiary proposal, Robespierre suggested that the clergy should renounce their celibacy. He saw family as the basis of society, referencing "marriage as a fertile source of virtue."⁷⁹ To have the clergy exempt from these natural functions was tantamount to being given privileges. As an avid Latin linguist, Robespierre can quickly decipher that *privilege* in Latin translates to "private law." And as a staunch democrat, Robespierre abhors any custom that privatizes a universal good.

Robespierre was determined to dismantle the mountain of aristocratic privileges. He said, "A nation is truly corrupt when. . . it passes from democracy to aristocracy."⁸⁰ There was an ongoing ideological battle, aristocracy versus democracy, in Robespierre's conscience that fueled his hatred towards the nobility. For Robespierre, a democracy epitomized the apex of governmental form. It was inclusive of the entire nation, unlike that of the aristocracy that only favored the wealthy few. Robespierre's greatest effort was his political involvement in the night of August 4, 1789. This eventful night was remembered for the

⁷⁸ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 124.

⁷⁹ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 43.

⁸⁰ Bienvenu, *Ninth of Thermidor*, 37.

abolition of noble and Church privileges. Feudal obligations were officially dissolved and all the tenants who worked on the land were freed. Church *tithes* were abolished as the Assembly aimed to universalize the tax system. The privilege of buying and selling state offices, which was the dominant route for most nobles was eliminated.⁸¹ Through the advocacy of these measures, Robespierre strived for an egalitarian society.

He also believed that a democracy would only prosper if the citizenry were active and virtuous patriots. Robespierre said, “Not only is virtue the soul of democracy, but virtue can only exist within that form of government.”⁸² What was virtue? George Rudé explains it as “essentially that which contributes to the public good.”⁸³ Robespierre prioritized on launching a civic regeneration of France in order to secure this goal. This included reforming the education system. McPhee details the educational program: “The texts that dominated the curriculum—and which were to be referred to regularly thereafter by Robespierre and his generation—had been written between 80 BC and AD 120, at a time when the greatest days of the Roman Republic were assumed.”⁸⁴ As a young student himself at College of Louis-le-Grand, Robespierre was fluent in all topics related to the Classical era. The Greeks and Romans were innovators, philosophers, and achievers of wisdom. Robespierre wanted students to use these classical heroes as their role models to build civic virtue. Educating young, moldable minds about the great days of the Roman Republic would also create a sense of purpose and epic empowerment. Robespierre hoped to spur an almost mythological effect on the population, invigorating them with an epic purpose to steer France towards a new Republican era. Additionally, McPhee noted the details of Robespierre’s promotion of

⁸¹ Andress, *The Terror*, 28.

⁸² Bienvenu, *The Ninth of Thermidor*, 75

⁸³ Rudé, *Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat*, 95.

⁸⁴ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 17.

ethics. “Aristotle’s *Ethics* was a key text, teaching that pride, jealousy, licentiousness and greed were the antitheses of wisdom, justice, temperance and knowledge, and that discipline, humility and piety could lead the weak to a state of virtue.”⁸⁵ Robespierre’s identity as a liberal democrat was infused with these Spartan virtues, and he championed these standards as the regime’s new code of social conduct. He expected society to comply to these standards in order to fulfill their potential as virtuous citizens. Beyond shaping virtue, Robespierre proposed legislation for a well-rounded education. “The objective of national education will be to strengthen children’s bodies, to develop them through gymnastic exercise, to accustom them to manual labor. . . and to give them the knowledge necessary to all citizens whatever their profession.”⁸⁶ Similar to the trajectory of his own childhood, self-discipline and rapid maturation lay the basis of this view.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the essence of a democracy is the freedom to explore. By offering a wide range of programs, Robespierre promoted growth in talent. Talent was therefore not tied to birth, but hard work.

In this section, I examined the variety of components that make up Robespierre’s democratic identity. Structurally, he pushed for a strong, central legislature to express the pure General Will. Robespierre understood that the people required a civic regeneration before they might claim themselves as their own direct policymakers. Politically, Robespierre sought to codify his democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity through the vehement support of various civil liberties such as the right to vote, speak, and publish without fear of persecution. Economically, Robespierre pushed an agenda for a more

⁸⁵ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 16.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸⁷ Visit Chapter I: Who was Maximilien Robespierre of this essay to read more on Robespierre’s adolescence. Robespierre was a virtual orphan by the age of eight. In order to care for his younger siblings, he attended school for over twelve years.

egalitarian society. Robespierre's democratic identity was strengthened by sacrificing the corrupt traditions of monarchy and aristocratic privilege. His vision of a democracy could not be completely achieved until France experienced a regeneration of morals.

Chapter III

Robespierre, the Tyrannical Dictator

Robespierre drastically departs from his heroic role as a liberal democrat as he transforms into a figure who exercised state-sponsored terror in the name of national safety. In a speech delivered to the citizen-deputies of the National Convention in 1794, Robespierre urgently expressed, “We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish with them.”⁸⁸ France was embroiled in a two-front war, one external, one internal, both sides avenging the downfall of the monarchy. Externally, France battled an asymmetric warfare against five major European nations: Austria, Prussia, Holland, Spain, and Britain; the second front was a fierce civil war of royalists versus republicans. The urgency for order during this wartime crisis was mostly delegated to the twelve members of the Committee of Public Safety. In the summer of 1793, Robespierre was elected as the leading member, effectively rendering him the most powerful man in France. To give a sense of the magnitude of the Committee of Public Safety’s power in 1793, military operations, economic reform, civic programs, legislative proposals, and law enforcement decision-making were all under its discretion.

R. R. Palmer considers the Committee as “the first war cabinet . . . [that] called out the total resources of the country, human and material, moral and scientific; . . . The Committee was also the first dictatorship whose stated aim was the complete regeneration of society. In this aim it failed.”⁸⁹ The major task of the Committee was to design and enforce measures to quell the rise of anti-revolutionary insurrections. These bloodletting events intensified into a period of havoc known as the Reign of Terror. As a leading member of the Committee of Public Safety, the concentration of executive power was within Robespierre’s

⁸⁸ Bienvenu, *Ninth of Thermidor*, 38.

⁸⁹ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 385.

palm. “Subdue liberty’s enemies by terror, and you will be right as founders of the Republic.”⁹⁰ Violence served as a fundamental force in the development of Robespierre’s persona as a dictator. In the context of the French Revolution, violence has two particular meanings: excessive force and violation of democratic values. In Robespierre’s famous definition: “Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice.”⁹¹ In this section, I will examine the features of Robespierre’s role as a tyrannical dictator by analyzing its development on an intrinsic and extrinsic scale. Intrinsically, Robespierre’s relationship with violence was predominantly characterized by an ideological betrayal of his own democratic ideals. Having justified this by the circumstantial distress of the nation, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety suspended civil liberties and basic rights to freedom and privacy guaranteed by the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Moreover, he prepared himself to be a master orator, invoking charismatic authority to augment his appeal to the restless mobs whose rage he aspired to exploit. Extrinsically, Robespierre approved outward expressions of terror. Corporal violence was an expedient policy to suppress anti-republican conduct. Ralph Korngold justified Robespierre’s violent actions as simply a valid response to an emergency crisis. “A public man may, in times of peace and comparative quiet, oppose capital punishment and favor unrestricted democracy and liberty of the press, yet in time of war and violent revolution, may take the exact opposite stand.”⁹² Yet to what extent can emergency powers be used before it became an excuse for unchecked executive authority?

To fortify his personal appeal, Robespierre evoked authority based on his charisma—an inherent, almost mystical, inexplicable trait that elicited confidence from the masses. His presence was not very daunting. Standing at five-foot-three with a pale,

⁹⁰ Bienvenu, *Ninth of Thermidor*, 39.

⁹¹ Ibid., 38.

⁹² Ralph Korngold, *Robespierre: First Modern Dictator* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1937), 204.

pockmarked countenance, Robespierre's reputation as a man crucially depended on his oratorical prowess. Robespierre rarely used fists to fight, preferring instead to claim dominance with words. His appeal to the visceral emotions of the people became his standard weapon. Historian Simon Schama commented that "public utterance in different forums—the revolutionary club, the convention, even the military camp—would assume a strategic importance. . . . Public diction, then, was public power."⁹³ Robespierre was not a naturally gifted speaker, yet he identified the importance of impassioned speech, and thus he made it a priority to cultivate that skill. When preparing a speech, Robespierre calculated each word of every sentence to make sure it captured the essence of his revolutionary thought.⁹⁴ In a speech Robespierre gave to the National Convention on May 26, 1794, almost exactly two months before his execution, he presented this categorization of the French people:

[T]here are two peoples in France. The one is the mass of citizens, pure, simple, thirsting for justice and friends of liberty. [And the others are] people of rogues... of hypocritical counterrevolutionaries who place themselves between the people and their representatives in order to fool the one and slander the other; . . . As long as this impure race exists, the Republic will be unhappy and precarious.⁹⁵

Robespierre's frequent usage of abstract terms such as "justice" and "liberty" had a twofold purpose. First, its abstractedness provided a sense of universality. Robespierre not only reached a wider audience with this language, but by universalizing his message, he elevated his role as something more than just a functionary. He displayed himself as someone driven by principle. Secondly, abstract concepts are inherently vulnerable to interpretation. You

⁹³ Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 168.

⁹⁴ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 65.

⁹⁵ Robespierre, "On the Enemies of the Nation," trans. Mitch Abidor. Marxist.org, February 1, 2020, <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/robespierre/1794/enemies.htm>.

may recall Robespierre referring to “Terror [as] nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible justice.” Robespierre had the rare knack of relating two words as permissible synonyms even though they traditionally juxtapose each other. If Robespierre were to travel back to his years as a docile, young lawyer before the Revolution, he would frown upon using terror and justice as correlatives. It is evident that the Revolution had transformed his semantics. Additionally, the speech illustrates Robespierre’s tendency to view matters in absolutes—light or dark, patriot or traitor, and “citizens” or “rogues.” Binary descriptions made it simpler for the public to comprehend his message. Most importantly, speaking in absolutes disregard the opportunity for compromise. Robespierre spoke resolutely, which likely eased many anxious revolutionaries. Moreover, Robespierre had set up an “us” versus “them” outlook by saying there were only two types of people in France. He rallied the crowd by attacking the enemy with a thunderous charge. He labeled counterrevolutionaries as a part of an “impure race,” which was a suggestion for sanitization by collectivization. In other words, the call for elimination of any and all groups that were suspected of being counterrevolutionary.

Propaganda and control of the media became essential weapons in Robespierre’s arsenal as an effective leader, for he sought to dominate public opinion, resorting to whatever means necessary, to infuse it with Republican pride. Once priding himself as an advocate for free speech, Robespierre curtailed these individual liberties with the intention of protecting the nascent Republic from demoralization and doubt. For propaganda, Robespierre always fancied grandiloquent and poetic devices. This may be a lasting passion from his days as a literary master at the *Rosati*.⁹⁶ He felt compelled to pepper Paris with

⁹⁶ *Rosati* was a literary club Robespierre attended as a young lawyer in his childhood province of Arras.

symbolic representations of the Republic. Physical symbols of the new regime included busts and paintings of the deities of equality and fraternity which replaced statues of Louis XVI and other royal symbols.⁹⁷ Symbolism became a means of propagandizing the Revolutionary Government's confidence in the new regime. Symbolic artifacts indoctrinated the masses to the new Republican program. Most terribly among these symbols was the guillotine. Such a contraption was typically reserved for members of the upper echelons due to its purportedly painless and rapid ability to decapitate its victims. The guillotine debuted in Paris in 1789 when a deputy from the National Assembly named Dr. Guillotine suggested its efficiency. Schama noted that it was a "reform of capital punishment in keeping with the equal status of accorded to all citizens in the Declaration of the Rights of Man."⁹⁸ Everyone was equal under the guillotine. To Robespierre, the guillotine was an extension of state authority, thereby effectively making it an extension of his own dictatorial power. The guillotine served as his "sword of the law." This fatal apparatus with its domineering, almost medieval, presence served as a symbol for revolutionary justice.

The utilization of violence was not kept behind thick curtains or done discretely. In fact, Paris took pride in making a spectacle of it. No other mechanization amplified the performance than the guillotine. Robespierre's orchestration of show trials testified his fondness for performative violence. Show trials guaranteed the Parisian crowd's enjoyment, for it constituted a perfect blend of drama, death, and vengeance. Two famous victims included the deposed royal monarchs, citizens Louis Capet and Marie Antoinette. The trial of Louis XVI was virtually non-existent, for he was not afforded a proper trial.⁹⁹ Robespierre believed that Louis XVI did not deserve a trial, only an execution. Therefore,

⁹⁷ McPhee, *Liberty or Death*, 218.

⁹⁸ Schama, *Citizens*, 619.

⁹⁹ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 141–44.

Robespierre was complicit in both an ideological betrayal to the democratic law of due process as well as the explicit approval of the death penalty. Secondly, the trial of Marie Antoinette demonstrated his lack of interest in sparing powerless women. His preoccupation with symbolic threats had emerged in the broken queen's trial. Marie Antoinette was executed on October 16, 1793 on grounds of her moral decadence. She was accused of most of the vices Robespierre associated with enemies of the fatherland: "slander, treason [...] . . . poisoning, atheism, corruption, famine, assassinations."¹⁰⁰ Marie was sentenced to death for being, in the words of Schama, "impure of body, thought, and deed."¹⁰¹ Simon Schama captured the drama of her swan song: "After the inevitable sentence, Marie Antoinette . . . wrote a last letter to her sister-in-law, confiding the children to her[.]. . . Prepared for death with her hair cut, she flinched on seeing the open cart." She would not be spared the "obloquy of the crowd."¹⁰² Marie Antoinette's cart was open, for Robespierre and the Convention desired for the people to express for the final time their vengeance. At that moment, Marie no longer represented a broken woman; she epitomized the centuries of oppression experienced by the French population under an absolute monarchy. Though defenseless and powerless, Robespierre approved the execution of Marie because she was a liability to the young Republic, as well as a threat to his system of moral values.

Higonnet commented that Robespierre's "greatest crime" was dominating public opinion.¹⁰³ R. R. Palmer argued that "opinion meant public opinion, which in turn meant the opinions of Jacobins and *sans-culottes*."¹⁰⁴ Both historians agree that Robespierre restricted the freedom of the press, for he intended to maintain "public opinion" in alignment with the

¹⁰⁰ Robespierre, "On the Enemies of the Nation."

¹⁰¹ Schama, *Citizens*, 798.

¹⁰² Ibid., 799.

¹⁰³ Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue*, 126.

¹⁰⁴ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 113.

views of the Jacobins and *sans-culottes*, groups who have not failed to sustain the revolutionary spirit. During the course of the Terror, the political involvement of the Jacobin club increased with each election, mostly due to Robespierre's dictatorial tendency to suppress political adversaries. As the most influential member of the Jacobin club, Robespierre had control of steering their radical movement. Higonnet described the Jacobin ideology (Jacobinism) in two phases. In the beginning, Jacobinism prevailed as "a libertarian doctrine of individual freedom and becoming;" however, once Jacobinism was absorbed "in minds and places where individualist values were feebly implanted [,] . . . we find the measure of Jacobinism's terrorist decay."¹⁰⁵ Prior to the Reign of Terror, before France submerged into a multi-front war, Robespierre's democratic persona shined. His libertarian spirit was at least conducive to the nominal construction of the Republic. However, as Higonnet noted, there was a shift in the Jacobin identity once key individuals and events perverted their original democratic passions. Their mission as drivers of the Revolution became less sympathetic to individual freedoms, and more accepting of violence as a legitimate governmental policy. To link the Jacobin spirit with a revolutionary body, Robespierre depended on a strong connection between the Jacobins and the *sans-culottes*. The *sans-culottes*, or men 'without breaches,' was a term designated to the militant working-class revolutionaries from 1792-94.¹⁰⁶ Albert Soboul studied the dynamic and destructive relationship between the Jacobins and militant working-class. When Robespierre joined the Committee of Public Safety as a Jacobin in 1793, Soboul said it marked "the beginning of a new policy of national and revolutionary defense, which rested on the support of. . . the Jacobins and *sans-culottes*. For more than one reason, Robespierre has come to be regarded as

¹⁰⁵ Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue*, 258.

¹⁰⁶ Andress, *The Terror*, 389.

the symbol of this policy.”¹⁰⁷ Robespierre believed that the Jacobins supplied the educated-bourgeois radicalism while the *sans-culottes* obediently served as a form of national defense. What compelled the *sans-culottes* to follow Robespierre’s direction was predominantly due to his promise for a more egalitarian regime; but the *sans-culottes* were not anticipating being pawns in the game. Robespierre continuously reinforced his control over the masses through confident orations at the Convention, control of public opinion, infusion of Jacobinism, and mobilization of the oppressed classes.

To advance the domination of public opinion, Robespierre imposed severe censorship on individuals whose writings and ideas contradicted his own or failed to advance the Republic’s reputation as an upright regime. Stanley Loomis notes that “journalists and all snoop or opinionated folk were anathema to Robespierre.”¹⁰⁸ Censorship naturally violated the freedom to write and speak; it repudiated basic civil liberties Robespierre valiantly fought for before the Terror. Technically, Robespierre had legal reason to use what appeared to be “extraconstitutional” powers since the Constitution of 1793 had never been officially implemented after its construction. During the Terror, most newspaper agencies were banned from publishing articles for mass circulation. In 1791, Robespierre insisted that “‘freedom of the press cannot be distinguished from freedom of speech: they are both as sacred as nature’.”¹⁰⁹ However, in 1792, as France entered war with Austria, he criticized and seized any material that he felt would demoralize France.¹¹⁰ In less than a year, Robespierre would not hesitate to violate the democratic standard of open opinion. Was the emergency of war sufficient justification to curb freedom of speech? Robespierre’s chronic weakness

¹⁰⁷ Soboul, “Robespierre and the Popular Movement,” 56.

¹⁰⁸ Stanley Loomis, *Paris in the Terror: June 1793–July 1794* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1964), 335.

¹⁰⁹ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 88–89.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

was his inability to differentiate between friend and foe, or acceptable set of differences versus grave libel. James Michael Eagan wrote: “As the Revolution progressed and as [Robespierre] became more suspicious, his censorship of the press tightened proportionately.”¹¹¹ The higher the degree Robespierre’s paranoia for anti-Republican activity, the more willing he was to curb individual freedoms.

Robespierre’s inability to distinguish between ally or enemy could be illustrated by his relationship with fellow deputies. Though it was Robespierre’s wish to unify France under one republican program, he could not prevent factional tensions from arising within the government. Robespierre vowed that “[Factions] will perish. All the factions that rely upon their power in order to destroy our freedom.”¹¹² His response to this feeling of paranoia was more terror and more death. Most of the enemies that Robespierre sentenced to death included his former close comrades such as Georges Danton. Friendship was a relationship he could never afford as a dictator. Sincere alliances were forfeited for the sake of extinguishing factional tensions. Danton, leader of the Girondins, a moderate faction of the Jacobins, was once a powerful ally that galvanized Paris alongside Robespierre. Hilaire Belloc described Danton as having a “tenderness . . . [that] was hidden under the energy of his rough voice, great frame, and violent gesture.”¹¹³ Since the Revolutionary commenced in 1789, Danton had been a juggernaut in arousing popular action to support the construction of the Republic. He was the man who displayed a dangerous mixture of fearlessness, carelessness, and tenderness. Danton enjoyed the interests of the common man: women, gambling, and alcohol.¹¹⁴ Danton illustrated a personability that Robespierre lacked. This

¹¹¹ James Michael Eagan, *Maximilien Robespierre: Nationalist Dictator* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 84.

¹¹² Robespierre, “On the Enemies of the Nation.”

¹¹³ Hilaire Belloc, *Danton: A Study* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899), 35.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

was one of the principal factors as to why he fell out of favor with Robespierre. But unlike Robespierre, Danton sensed the appropriate time for normalization and the need to reduce the tempo of the Terror. David Andress, author of *The Terror*, statistically revealed that the number of detained citizens reached to over three hundred thousand by the summer of Danton's death.¹¹⁵ Danton sensed the people's increasing weariness when the Reign of Terror was being unnecessarily prolonged; Robespierre strongly disagreed. As a reaction to Danton's plea for moderation, Robespierre signed his death warrant. Danton was executed on April 5, 1794. In historian Simon Schama's interpretation of the event, he wrote that "Danton tried to persuade Robespierre that their friendship had been broken by [other members of the Committee of Public Safety]. . . . Robespierre was not listening."¹¹⁶ Robespierre permitted Danton's execution on the grounds that he was merely not militant enough. What Schama's interpretation also illustrated was Robespierre's disinterestedness in allowing the indicted to defend themselves.

As Eagan observed, as the Revolution progressed, Robespierre grew more and more anxious of impending attacks from royal sympathizers and anti-Republicans. The primary responsibility of the Committee of Public Safety was to administer security throughout Paris and its outlying provinces. To fulfill that task, Robespierre recruited a multitude of surveillance agents to monitor the citizenry. Richard Cobb dedicated an extensive discourse on police authority during the French Revolution. He commented that Paris never faced a shortage of police during the Revolution. Indeed, "it increased in volume daily with the creation of each new police organization. . . . [B]y the summer of 1794, there were at least

¹¹⁵ Andress, *The Terror*, 213.

¹¹⁶ Schama, *Citizens*, 816.

half a dozen reporting to the . . . Committee of Public Safety.”¹¹⁷ Invoking the Committee’s broad wartime powers, Robespierre substantially increased the French bureaucracy. The creation of more police organizations was an extension of his own eyes and ears. German journalist Friedrich Sieburg contemptuously insisted that Robespierre viewed “no difference between people and the state. The state police inspected men’s hearts.”¹¹⁸ The ubiquity of the police diminished the valuation of privacy. Men were no longer safe to even think in any way that might offend the tight leadership of Robespierre. During the Reign of Terror, Robespierre was virtually supervising the various police bureaus—he was driven by the need to eliminate all his enemies and the extension of state action permitted him to accomplish that objective. In 1793, the Committee of Public Safety drafted a proposal that defined what constituted as an enemy. Known as the Law of Suspects, individuals were subject to arrest, and possible death, if they qualified as one of the following:

- I. Speaking or writing with language that show themselves partisans or tyranny or enemies of liberty
- II. Those to whom have been denied certificates of good citizenship
- III. Ex-nobles and their families who have not shown fidelity to the Republic¹¹⁹

These conditions were engineered with vague descriptions in order to broaden the discretionary scope of the police. However, as Sieburg said, Robespierre’s law enforcers “inspected men’s hearts.” Robespierre classified a criminal based on their display of virtue. Anything judged based on virtue could be applied to any situation. Palmer stated that legislation like the Law of Suspects “systematized and extended a body of practices that already existed haphazardly.”¹²⁰ To non-revolutionaries, the objective standards of the Law

¹¹⁷ Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789–1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 19.

¹¹⁸ Sieburg, *The Incorruptible*, 107.

¹¹⁹ John Black Sirich, *The Revolutionary Committees in the Departments of France, 1793–1794* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1971), 43–44.

¹²⁰ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 69.

of Suspects could be seen as a cancellation of the subjective vengeance of legislators like Robespierre. Yet, Robespierre's objective was to simply to legalize his own fears.

Historians tend to look no further than the Reign of Terror to prove their point that Robespierre was a tyrannical dictator. As someone who was well-informed of the Classic Greco-Roman era, Robespierre was familiar with the expansion of executive power in emergency times. During the Roman Republic, men who demonstrated a strong sense of civic duty and pride inherited authoritative powers during times of national crisis and exercised this immense power until the crisis was resolved. The French Revolution was indisputably a time of crisis. Robespierre seized this opportunity to display his intense patriotism and provide expediency to the arising exigencies. He employed terror against terror, all justified by the invocation of emergency war powers. Yet, the measures may have caused more harm than good. Robespierre's role in the Terror is indisputable. As a man who once abhorred the concept of capital punishment and who strived to establish a nation void of tyrants, Robespierre found himself not only complicit, but the symbol for violence, intolerance, and anti-democratic behavior. Intrinsically, he betrayed his democratic origins. Extrinsically, he supported the dispensation of corporal violence in order to suppress enemies who put the Republic at stake. Palmer regarded the Terror as an event that ultimately scarred France. He wrote, "The Terror . . . though it protected the Revolution, injured the Republic which it was supposed to found. After the Terror, France was more divided than ever."¹²¹ In times of the Revolution, Robespierre behaved like a tyrannical dictator. In times of post-revolution peace, historians will never know if Robespierre surrendered his immense executive authority. He justified his dependence on violence and

¹²¹ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 385.

terror as a necessary reaction to an emergency, but when were Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety planning to declare the end of this emergency? Robespierre embodied what the Revolution had been trying to destroy—the exercise of a singular will. French citizens were closely watched by the omnipotent Committee of Public Safety. Although the Committee was designed to oversee bureaucratic efficiency, it eventually found itself mimicking dangerous authoritarian institutions. Two months before the guillotine officially silenced his erratic mind, Robespierre expressed: “To make war on crime is the path to the tomb and to immortality, to favor crime is the path to the throne and scaffold.”¹²² Robespierre was sentenced to the scaffold, but did that render him a criminal? He would reject such a charge. In his view, the “war on crime” was proof of his love for France. He only lived long enough to watch himself become the enemy.

¹²² Robespierre, “On the Enemies of the Nation.”

Chapter IV Robespierre, The Puritanical Utopian

Central to the French Revolution was unbridled idealism, and no other Frenchman embodied that attribute more than the ‘Incorruptible’ Maximilien Robespierre. Robespierre dreamt, breathed, and lived the Revolution, for he invested the entirety of his strength and spirit to its ascending trajectory. According to R. R. Palmer, Robespierre “wanted a state founded upon morality. . . . His program was doubtless utopian; he expected a sudden regeneration of mankind, a complete transformation.”¹²³ Robespierre conducted the Reign of Terror in order to purify France from any lingering remnants of the Old Regime; however, the event was insufficient in meeting his vision of a perfect France. He painfully strived to implement a “utopia,” that is, a state operated on pure morals. Robespierre believed that his agenda was no longer political; it was biblical. The transition from an absolute regime to a democratic republic was a nominal achievement until Robespierre completed the “transformation” of “mankind.” In Robespierre’s own words, the goals he had in mind for France was “to fulfill nature’s desires, accomplish the destiny of humanity, . . . absolve providence from the long reign of crime and tyranny. Let France. . . eclipsing the glory of all free peoples. . . become the model for the nations.”¹²⁴ It was France’s divine destiny to become a model of democracy; Robespierre recoiled at the thought of blemishes in his new regime. John Laurence Carr asserts that Robespierre “was basically a religious, rather than a political, animal.”¹²⁵ Yet without Robespierre’s insistence on the viability of a perfect French Republic, his roles as a liberal democrat, as well as a tyrannical dictator, would not have gained its prominence. Robespierre’s embodied a degree of patriotism that very few Frenchmen could match.

¹²³ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 276–77.

¹²⁴ Biennu, *Ninth of Thermidor*, 34.

¹²⁵ John Laurence Carr, *Robespierre: The Force of Circumstance* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), 142.

In this section, I will examine the theological dimension of Robespierre's persona, the Puritanical Utopian. Robespierre renounced his Catholic faith as a student at Louis-le-Grand, but he still retained a powerful religious fervor.¹²⁶ This religious intensity became an important element in his success as a fanatic revolutionary leader, but it also caused Robespierre to be alienated from the French citizenry. He was aloof as a child, and he faced even greater isolation during the final stages of his life. As he ascended the political ladder, he preached a civic regeneration of society, striving for a perfect nation with a religion of its own—the Cult of the Supreme Being. Albert Soboul believes that the Cult was Robespierre's attempt at “placing the republican doctrine on a metaphysical foundation.”¹²⁷

Robespierre's sorrowful, yet productive adolescence imprinted a god-fearing attitude in his makeup that made him afraid of failure and a suitor of success. The loss of his mother at six years old, and the abandonment of his father at eight, destroyed any chance at an orthodox upbringing. Losing his mother was particularly difficult for Robespierre. His sister Charlotte recalled him crying over her every moment her name was brought up.¹²⁸ In regard to his estranged father, Robespierre's frustration outweighed his grief. His father gave him the glimpse of a life as a lawyer, but he also proved to Robespierre that bonds between blood could easily be broken. The father's abandonment of his motherless children also exemplified that it was easier to eliminate difficult relationships rather than waste the time trying to repair them. The technique of losing blood relatives for the sake of temporary relief carried with Robespierre, most especially since it shaped his role as dictator. It was simpler to execute enemies rather than live with the paranoia of their latent threat. The blend of grief for his mother and suppressed rage for his father had made Robespierre into a very sensitive

¹²⁶ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 11.

¹²⁷ Soboul, *The French Revolution*, 399.

¹²⁸ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 3.

and vulnerable man. Friedrich Sieburg describes Robespierre as a very lonely person.

“Sadness never left him; one would have said that it followed him like a shadow, had he not been himself its shadow.”¹²⁹

To overcome an emotionally distraught homelife, Robespierre took refuge in the school life where he spent an immense amount of time nurturing his piety. His instructors were priests from the Society of the Oratory of Jesus, commonly referred to as the Oratorians. What was particularly essential was the Oratorians’ mission to cultivate the students into becoming productive citizens of France guided by Christian virtues.¹³⁰ Under this instruction, Robespierre was trained to excel both in secular and spiritual affairs. Additionally, competition was rigorous during Robespierre’s years in college at Paris. The College of Louis-le-Grand annually posted prize-lists that awarded students who showed wisdom on Latin and Greek verses. J. M. Thompson reported that Robespierre earned first prize seven years in a row from 1769–1776.¹³¹ Robespierre would have been a nobody if not for his ability to outpace his classmates in the intellectual game. Based on these experiences, Robespierre entered politics with the mentality that failure was fundamentally inadmissible. His acumen and wisdom had been institutionally validated. It only came at the expense of a bookish adolescence, spending years as a hard-working student without any experience of a carefree, informal existence.

At a young age, Robespierre had shown that he developed a fear of failure and the desperate need to have his intelligence validated. Furthermore, he found solace in an ethical and pious lifestyle. Although he attended a church school, Robespierre renounced his Catholicism, but did not renounce religion. J. M. Thompson notes that during mass, it was

¹²⁹ Sieburg, *The Incorruptible*, 58.

¹³⁰ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 11.

¹³¹ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 8.

clear Robespierre expressed no interest in God; he would hold the hymnal but refused to sing.¹³² Robespierre lived in a generation when traditional religious authority substantially dwindled as scientific reasoning emerged as the more favorable form of judgement. Most progressive thinkers of eighteenth-century France rescinded their faith in traditional religions, particularly Catholicism. Although some philosophes preferred atheism, others converted to Deism, which resembled a type of theological humanism that posited the existence of an omnipotent being that created the world but did not interfere with it.¹³³ Robespierre may have renounced his traditional faith, but Thompson adds that he “was still sufficiently interested in the dogmatic side of Catholicism.”¹³⁴ Therefore, Robespierre’s relationship with religion was still quite profound. It nurtured his outlook on the world. He possessed a set of universal values which included purity, sacrifice, and virtue. Once he applied these principles to his political program, he captured the trust of the people instantly. A major result of Robespierre’s religious dogma was his belief that France could become the most perfect nation.

Robespierre’s fanaticism, fashioned from a dreamy and pious adolescence, found belonging in the passionate and radical climate of the Revolution. Initially, he gained popularity for his ability to speak with a sound mind and an authentic heart. Robespierre had faith in each of his words and actions. He was the ‘Incorruptible.’ David Andress writes that Robespierre earned that epithet because unlike most politicians who secured their seat through mischievous means, Robespierre was immune to bribery.¹³⁵ Perhaps buying office would only rekindle his perpetual hatred for aristocratic privilege. Still, Robespierre showed

¹³² Ibid., 12.

¹³³ Cobb and Jones, *Voices of the Revolution*, 25.

¹³⁴ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 12.

¹³⁵ Andress, *The Terror*, 56.

an uncommonly behaved demeanor. He would transfer this fondness of purity to his vision of a utopian France. Before a true French republic could be installed, there existed two necessary preconditions Robespierre passionately urged the citizenry to fulfill: active civic virtue and pure morals. John Laurence Carr describes Robespierre “offered man a vision of what France could become in the next century[.] . . . His heavenly city was a place for the hitherto oppressed and underprivileged—for Jews, Protestants, actors, and colored people, for instance—and as such is woven into the glorious tapestry of humanitarian progress.”¹³⁶ On a structural basis, Robespierre did achieve a place for oppressed people to be free. His vital role as a democrat helped to install the first French Republic that was governed by a protection of natural rights under a Constitution; however, Robespierre regarded these victories as complete. He was hesitant to institute a Republic in 1792 because “it required a culture of civic virtue, a regenerated society.”¹³⁷

Robespierre believed people are innately good but have been corrupted by social vices such as poverty and ignorance. France was not yet predisposed for a Republic. The Reign of Terror showed promise for a “[regenerated] society” through the elimination of the “impure race” that consisted of royal sympathizers, anti-republicans, and even neutral bystanders. However, the protraction of the Terror to over two long, exhausting years also testified to Robespierre’s inability to find peace and satisfaction with the population. Additionally, in times of a revolution, timing is the essence of everything. As a man who failed to grasp the concept of moderation, Robespierre’s idealism fatally outstripped the capacity of the rest of the nation. His temporal framework for the Revolution was still operating under his push for an ideal society. During the Reign of Terror, Robespierre and

¹³⁶ Carr, *The Force of Circumstances*, xi.

¹³⁷ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 135.

the Committee of Public Safety invoked their emergency wartime powers, disabling civil liberties, and acting with broad executive authority. But, when the people grew exhausted with the constant bloodletting of anti-patriots, Robespierre thrust them to continue their fight for the safety of the Republic. Robespierre had no plan of relinquishing his provisional, wartime authority because the smallest impurity constituted as an emergency crisis. “Patrice Higonnet argues that the paradox lay in the fact that the more powerful Robespierre and the Jacobins became as an institution, the more militarized and moralistic they became, and consequently the less support they had. The Jacobins’ “moralizing drive” propelled them to the “dehumanization of their enemies” and unleash the Terror in France.”¹³⁸

Although willing to spill blood for the people’s cause, Robespierre was always a social outsider. In terms of appearance, he refused to adopt the raggedy fashion that emerged during the Revolution. The militant working-class revolutionaries, the *sans-culottes*, were men who abandoned wearing knee breeches, for these were symbols of privilege from the Old Regime. Despite the shift in apparel, Robespierre did not dispense with his rather aristocratic choice of style: colorful waistcoats, powdered wigs, and two pairs of spectacles worn at the same time.¹³⁹ During a crisis when bread was in chronic shortage, flour should have been spared for bread, not wigs. Additionally, he rejected wearing the *bonnet rouge*, or the red liberty cap that most Parisians proudly fitted on their head to display their loyalty to the Republic.¹⁴⁰ Undoubtedly, the *bonnet rouge* was an essential part of the Revolution’s imagery, yet Robespierre did not want to identify himself as just another commoner rushing to fulfill his superficial urges. Robespierre would have considered it an affront to his virtuous being if his patriotism had been measured by costumes. In fact, Robespierre strongly disavowed

¹³⁸ Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue*, 241.

¹³⁹ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 160.

¹⁴⁰ Cobb and Jones, *Voices of the Revolution*, 139.

leading a material lifestyle, leading some historians to believe that he eschewed the basic interests of humans. Max Gallo proclaims that Robespierre's "life was one of asceticism and solitude."¹⁴¹ Furthermore, he disdainfully reacted towards typical human habits such as profanity and even blowing one's nose.¹⁴² Robespierre formalized the death warrant of his revolutionary ally, Georges Danton, because he was too much of a people person. Sieburg contrasts the two, commenting that Danton had a "compromising but warm humanity." Danton was "full-blooded, lover of life," whereas Robespierre possessed a "democratic mysticism" and was an "ascetic, hating enjoyment and . . . who coldly demanded . . . virtue that excluded happiness."¹⁴³ Like Robespierre, Danton's life was devoted to establishing the Republic. But unlike Robespierre, Danton forged a bond with the people on a personal and amicable level. Robespierre was out of touch with his constituents. He vocalized the poor peoples' grievances, but behind the political persona, he shunned their vulgar lifestyle. This may have resulted, in part, from the social circles he fraternized with. As a member of the exclusive Jacobin club, Robespierre's social network predominantly comprised of upper middle-class individuals with a fondness for intellectual sparring. Sieburg states that "the regular members of the Jacobin Club were well-behaved people' anyone who got drunk, or was uncivil, or otherwise gave offence, was expelled."¹⁴⁴

Robespierre's exclusivity and sense of superiority manifested itself in his denunciation of the habits of the common people. To be ordinary was insufficient. It was only on a few occasions that Robespierre mustered the will to engage with the working-class peoples face-to-face. As Stanley Loomis observed:

¹⁴¹ Max Gallo, *Robespierre: The Incorruptible A Psychobiography*, trans. by Raymond Rudorff (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 78.

¹⁴² Sieburg, *The Incorruptible*, 63.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 63–64

The fact that many men, frail creatures, continued to pursue such gross goals as sex and money grieved and angered him. To fit men into the inflexible shape of his Utopia it became necessary to do a little squeezing and finally, when they refused to fit the unyielding contours, to slice off the resisting portion.¹⁴⁵

This metaphor of Robespierre as the dressmaker, or the designer of the French republic, captures a crucial tension within his personality. As a democrat who idolized Rousseau, Robespierre continuously assured he firmly comprehended the General Will. His exhibition as a social democrat showed promise for a truly egalitarian society, not just a nominal democracy. However, as Scurr mentioned, Robespierre viewed the “pure General Will,” the interests of the people under “ideal circumstances.”¹⁴⁶ Therefore, it shattered Robespierre’s faith in humanity when Frenchmen continued to pursue temporal desires such as sex and money even after his efforts in steering them towards a new era of freedom. Perhaps Robespierre failed to realize that freedom of the individual was a double-edged sword. In his vision of a utopia, people would cultivate harmony and authenticity. They would adhere to non-materialistic and non-transactional lifestyles. The majority of people did not share his vision of purity. Robespierre went too far with pushing forth his ideals, when he thought it was not going far enough. Max Gallo remarks that “Maximilien was overwhelmed by a disgust for life as it really was. He could no longer bear such a life and such a reality, and he knew he could no longer believe he could transform them. He would have to die.”¹⁴⁷

In line with his vision of a French utopia, Robespierre promoted the **Cult of the Supreme Being, the new civil religion of France**. The cult was inaugurated in 1793 in hopes of supplanting atheism and Christianity. Robespierre designed the Supreme Being as the divine entity overseeing the virtuous construction of the Republic To legitimate this

¹⁴⁵ Loomis, *Paris in the Terror*, 32.

¹⁴⁶ Scurr, *Fatal Purity*, 232.

¹⁴⁷ Gallo, *The Incorruptible*, 301.

urgency for a national faith, he proposed a decree to the National Convention in 1794 with the main objective of promoting national recognition of his deity. The first three amendments of the decree were:

Article I: The French people recognize the existence of the Supreme Being

Article II: The French people recognize that the best way of worshipping the Supreme Being is to do one's republican duties.

Article III: These duties include: to detest bad faith and despotism, to punish tyrants and traitors, to assist the unfortunate, to defend the oppressed, and to behave with justice towards all men.¹⁴⁸

In Robespierre's construction of these three measures, Article I validated his faith in a supernatural entity. This was his attempt to attack atheism which he vehemently considered to be aristocratic. To be devoid of intense faith was tantamount to snobbishness. What did the Supreme Being represent? It collectively represented the attributes that Robespierre championed for as a liberal democrat: discrediting despots and tyrants, equality for the poor, and accountability to the justice of the law, which were codified in Article II and III. Symbols, he would argue, were masterful pieces of propaganda. The construction of the Supreme Being could have been a sneaky, political move rather than a dramatic act of faith. However, Robespierre's religious intensity cannot be dismissed as something so petty. His promotion of the Cult, most crucially, exposed his rapidly increasing distance from reality. With each earnest push to attach himself to the Supreme Being, the more he pulled away from representing the people's secular interests. The Festival of the Supreme Being became Robespierre's most grandiose demonstration of his religious zeal.

The Festival was held on June 8, supplanting the Christian holy day of Pentecost on the old Gregorian calendar, and inaugurating the new civil religion.¹⁴⁹ In the summer of

¹⁴⁸ Eagan, *Nationalist Dictator*, 172.

¹⁴⁹ Soboul, *The French Revolution*, 399.

1794, Robespierre had been appointed the president of the National Convention, effectively rendering him the most powerful man in France. He exploited this power by declaring himself the central figure of the Festival. Dressed in a sky-blue waistcoat, Robespierre looked like an angel on Earth. Simon Schama views the Festival as a way of “[convincing] skeptics that there was, after all, a Supreme Being and Robespierre was his prophet.”¹⁵⁰ In a speech addressed to the people during the festival of the Supreme Being, Robespierre argued that the Supreme Being:

. . . did not create kings to devour humankind. He did not create priests to harness us like vile animals [T]o give an example of baseness, selfish pride, perfidy, avarice, debauch, and falsehood. He created men to mutually assist and love each other, and to arrive at happiness by the path of virtue.¹⁵¹

Robespierre designed the Supreme Being to be this faultless, gentle, and purposeful divinity for two specific reasons. First, he aimed to create the illusion that France was destined to be a perfect Republic. By perfect, Robespierre means a republic that had reached the destination at the end of the “path of virtue.” Interestingly, Robespierre cited the sentiment of “love” in his speech. The semantics of his speech was typically grounded in a confluence of Spartan and Christian values such as sacrifice, discipline, and utmost, virtue; all of the attributes that are antithetical to egocentric, superficial credos such as “selfish pride” and “falsehood.” By 1794, Robespierre’s connection with a divine entity became less of a public stunt, and more for his own immortalization.

Robespierre never showed fear of the temporal limitations of man. In fact, he embraced death as an affirmative step towards immortality. As a revolutionary driven by divine goals, Robespierre aimed to achieve the status of martyrdom. Jean-Paul Marat, a

¹⁵⁰ Schama, *Citizens*, 831.

¹⁵¹ Robespierre, “The Festival of the Supreme Being,” trans. Mitch Abidor, Marxist.org, February 1, 2020, <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/robespierre/1794/festival.htm>.

radical journalist during the French Revolution known for his incendiary pamphlets that called for royal blood, beat Robespierre to the role of martyr. While soaking in his private, sudsy bathtub, a young woman extremist, Charlotte Corday, stabbed him to death.¹⁵² Marat's assassination in 1793 would be immortalized by the propagandists of the Revolution as effigies of Marat were situated in public spaces in order to be adorned. Paintings of his assassination were hung in the rostrum of the National Convention.¹⁵³ Max Gallo comments that "Maximilien was exclusively and jealously holding fast to his claim to be a martyr."¹⁵⁴ Robespierre's fascination to death was an indication of his disillusionment with life, the realization that he misjudged the people's will to train themselves to become more virtuous beings. He no longer found his place in the human realm; to achieve martyrdom would immortalize himself as a symbol, hopefully as the auspicious symbol for a stronger republic.

In 1794, Robespierre's obsession with death was about to be realized. During a session at the National Convention, Robespierre refused to cooperate with the deputies. They debated on the Terror, and whether or not it should be moderated. Robespierre knew his stance on this topic; he was unwilling to dampen the rapid speed of purifying France from anti-revolutionary blemishes. R. R. Palmer said, "He now made himself something more, a lone and lofty individual looking down upon the government."¹⁵⁵ Max Gallo described the act being "such political maladroitness. . . . Maximilien wanted to remain a man alone."¹⁵⁶ At this moment, Robespierre discovered that his support system was no longer operating by his side. It was not just counterrevolutionaries he feared as enemies; he lost the allegiance of his government. The deputies at the Convention no longer saw a leader

¹⁵² McPhee, *Liberty or Death*, 205.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 217.

¹⁵⁴ Gallo, *The Incorruptible*, 233.

¹⁵⁵ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 370.

¹⁵⁶ Gallo, *The Incorruptible*, 301.

of France in Robespierre; they saw a man deranged from a fantasy he could not relent from making true. Sieburg took account of Robespierre's rude awakening: "[Robespierre] recognized in a flash the cause of his damnation: the irrelevance of pure thought."¹⁵⁷ As a puritanical utopian and as the 'Incorruptible,' Robespierre's vision for a perfect French Republic, a Republic that practiced moral behavior and active virtue, was merely a dream. His inability to let go, his refusal to compromise, resulted in his self-condemnation.

Robespierre's role as puritanical utopian established his popularity in the Revolution, but it also sent him spiraling to his downfall. The price he paid for having his heads in the clouds was its dismemberment on earth. His experience as a lonely yet pious student helped to develop his idealistic outlook; he prophesied a French Republic that would become the democratic model of the world. Robespierre possessed this intense enthusiasm; however, when he realized that the new French republicans could not match his level of zeal and purity, he suffered. The Cult of the Supreme Being aimed to affirm his republican principles such as the distrust of kings, priests, and other symbols that obliterated with the demise of the Old Regime. By promoting a civil religion, Robespierre aroused French nationalism but also exposed a fatal flaw. Robespierre was more than just a politician, statesman, or representative—he was striving for the role of a martyr. The increasing tempo of his push for a pure French state alienated him from the people that legitimized his power. He was lonely as a child and he suffered even greater isolation at the conclusion of his life. As a utopian, Robespierre went searching for something pure, something absolute and eternal. On this journey, the further he travelled towards Utopia, the more he strayed from the General Will.

¹⁵⁷ Sieburg, *The Incorruptible*, 201.

Chapter V

Robespierre, The People's Lawyer

Robespierre has proven that it requires a spectrum to illustrate the extensiveness and complexity of his character. Democratic hero, violent dictator, and starry-eyed utopian were three vital roles he played during the course of his life. In this section, I will present the fourth and final identity: Robespierre as the people's lawyer. Robespierre's legal mind has often been lost in the shuffle of his more dramatic personas; however, his legal mind was central to his existence. The profession became his primary mode of thinking and way of life. He solved matters litigiously, and when he secured greater political dominance, he would go as far as to write the laws to justify his personal interests. During the Reign of Terror, the suppression of anti-republican activity was Robespierre's primary concern since he believed it was the only means to bring safety to the nascent Republic. However, the laws he would implement would persecute more on intent rather than action. Patrice Higonnet writes that "intent had often mattered as much as the actuality of criminal action. Had the accused *willfully* wronged another?"¹⁵⁸ To emphasize the significance of Robespierre's role as a lawyer, I will discuss three aspects of his legal identity. First, I will analyze the abstract values and legal philosophies that shaped his understanding of the law. What were Robespierre's definition of justice, equality, and security? Then, I will examine how he applied these theoretical frameworks into actual legislation. Lastly, I will analyze the dynamic relationship between Robespierre's abstracted view of the law versus its application in society. Were laws served to promise individuals' freedom from oppression, or did Robespierre intend to use them as forms of restraints? These three aspects of Robespierre's identity will be in regard to his view on constitutional, penal, judicial, economic, and criminal matters. As an officer of

¹⁵⁸ Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue*, 80.

the Committee of Public Safety, did Robespierre craft and enforce laws that guaranteed justice and security to the Republic? Or were laws merely facades to mask his dictatorial tendencies of suppressing anti-revolutionary acts?

Of all professions, why did Robespierre decide to become a lawyer? One reason was to stay consistent with family tradition. From Maximilien, the Robespierre patriarchs have practiced law for five consecutive generations; their milieu as men of the law earned them the respect of the French bourgeoisie.¹⁵⁹ Robespierre's father, Francois, maintained a decent standard of living for his family of six, albeit he abandoned his children after his wife's death in 1764. If Robespierre had a vendetta against his father, he did not express it by cutting ties with their shared passion for the law. R. R. Palmer states, "'Lawyers were often leaders in their communities, men of opinions, convincing talkers. . . eager to enter public affairs themselves, perhaps even concerned with the improvement of justice.'" ¹⁶⁰ Under the Old Regime before 1789, leaders were often selected based on social rank. Without deserving it by merit, the nobility had the birth-right privilege to access superior positions in government and society.¹⁶¹ Robespierre's decision to pursue a legal career automatically marked him as an extraordinary individual. Despite his father, Robespierre was too smart to depart from the profession because it was the stable route to fulfilling not only a social expectation, but a sentimental void. What most elevated his passion for the law was his thirst for equity, reason, and above all justice for the deprived. As a child, Robespierre grew angry at the sight of injustice. Robespierre's younger sister, Charlotte, famously wrote a memoir that exposed a romantic, yet troubled side of Robespierre. In her account of Robespierre's relationship with justice as a youth, she recalled that he would protect the younger children from being bullied

¹⁵⁹ Visit page 14 of paper for more background and source citations on Robespierre's adolescence.

¹⁶⁰ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 17–18.

¹⁶¹ William Doyle, *The Ancien Regime*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 21.

by the older ones, resorting to fists if diplomacy failed.¹⁶² He trained himself to be able to detect discrepancies in power dynamics. Defending the defenseless was an act Robespierre believed would level the “bullies” from their inflated sense of arrogance.

When Robespierre received his legal training in Paris beginning in the late 1770s, his quest for justice and equality could not have been crafted during a more auspicious moment in history. The Enlightenment deeply affected how he viewed the world. J. M. Thompson writes that Robespierre’s legal instructors taught him how to “hate their own government. They learnt the love of liberty and longed to know France might be freed.”¹⁶³ Robespierre’s legal training was an exposure to progressive ideas designed to break the mold. At this moment, Robespierre experienced a tension between maintaining his humble upkeep of bourgeois tradition and nurturing his rebellious, libertarian spirit. As a law student, there were just two lectures each day, and therefore Robespierre found time to explore Paris.¹⁶⁴ By the late eighteenth century, Parisian intellectuals nurtured radical thinking. Paris also exposed the major wealth discrepancies within the population of five hundred thousand inhabitants. While the wealthier Frenchmen constructed new town houses along the cultural landmarks of the city, commoners huddled in much tighter lodgings.¹⁶⁵ Robespierre witnessed this imbalance and used this experience to nurture his philosophy for equality. The formulation of his legal philosophies—defense of the poor, equality, and progressivism—were mostly conceived by simply imbibing the existing tensions of Paris.

At twenty-three years old, Robespierre graduated from the prestigious university in

¹⁶² Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 10; Historians remain reluctant in Charlotte Robespierre’s memoirs because they retain an inherent bias in favor of her brother. However, her memoirs grant a perspective that cannot be accredited to any other observer of Robespierre.

¹⁶³ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 9.

¹⁶⁴ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 23.

¹⁶⁵ George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 13, 15.

Paris with a license to practice law. Earning a degree in the bustling city was a formative experience for Robespierre; however, once he registered as an advocate before the highest court in Paris, he decided to return back to Arras to launch his career.¹⁶⁶ Although his outlook on the world had drastically matured in Paris, there still remained a part of Robespierre that recognized the futility of fighting for cases in Paris. The city was too radical for his humble beginnings. Not until he became a deputy in the national government would Robespierre understand his capacity to fight for people's rights on a grander scale. Yet before he rose to prominence as a lawyer-politician, Robespierre was a popular provincial lawyer. Lawyers were professionally designed to be persuasive, assertive, and driven by a respectable ratio of passion and reason. Their role in society can often be perceived as adversarial as if their employment was only useful when individuals experience antagonisms among one another and require a defender to litigate their conundrums. Inversely, lawyers can be viewed as conciliators, healers of social-based wounds. It is this latter definition that Robespierre strived to convey himself as a young country lawyer.

When Robespierre returned back to Arras, he developed a keener sense of class distinctions. Robespierre's criteria for the cases he selected was based on his respect for justice rather than his quest for profit. Most of the clients he represented were either poor commoners or branded outcasts.¹⁶⁷ His most popular cases included the defense of an old inventor accused of electrocuting his neighbors. 'The lightning-rod' case became one of Robespierre's most publicized cases. He had to defend a retired lawyer named de Vissery who had installed a lightning rod conductor on the side of his home. The lightning rod was intended to generate an electric current to test as a source of energy.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Rudé, *Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat*, 16.

¹⁶⁷ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 23.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

Fearful that the rod would cause a fire, neighbors filed a complaint against de Vissery at the Sheriff's Court and requested that the rod be removed. Robespierre was selected to conduct the de Vissery's case due to his renowned eloquence. Robespierre had practiced poetry at the Club of Roses, or the *Rosati*, and thus he was adept in speaking and writing. To defend the inventor, Robespierre's legal strategy consisted of references to the innovations of Benjamin Franklin. Additionally, he demonstrated persuasive scientific evidence related to lightning rods. Based on the effectiveness of his evidence, Robespierre won the case. Before civil liberties were even codified in the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen in 1789, Robespierre respected the rights of individuals, particularly their right to property. The lightning-rod case exemplified his ability to defend an intellectual outsider through the presentation of empirical evidence. Robespierre illustrated his support for reason, particularly scientific-based reasoning. This progressive outlook would upset the privileged orders of the Old Regime who typically justified their position by divine right and not merit based. George Rudé commented that the Arras authorities "did not take kindly to the vigor with which [Robespierre] championed for the poor and humble and denounced the rich and mighty."¹⁶⁹ As a provincial lawyer, Robespierre had the institutional authority to defend the causes he expressed sympathy for as a child. His legal philosophy gravitated around uplifting the oppressed.

Fundamentally, Robespierre supported man's natural rights. The added dimension of legal naturalism to Robespierre's legal identity broadened his message for change. It situated his defense of the oppressed on a universal field, as it permitted him to use abstract values such as freedom and justice in his speeches. In 1792, he wrote in his journal, "The Defender

¹⁶⁹ Rudé, *Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat*, 17.

of the Constitution.” “The majority of the nation wants to rest under the auspices of the new Constitution, on the breast of freedom and peace. I need not say that only the love of justice and truth will guide my pen.”¹⁷⁰ As a trusted lawyer faithful to the imprescriptible rights of man, Robespierre invoked a new level of authority. The slight personification to “freedom” and “peace” represented Robespierre’s elevation from a country lawyer to a human rights lawyer. The natural rights that French citizens fought for were codified in the Declaration of the Rights of Man of Citizen. Drafted by the commoners’ representatives in the National Assembly in 1789, the Declaration expressed the inalienable rights of man as “liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.”¹⁷¹ As a lawyer, attention to these natural rights strengthened his ability as a democrat. As a democrat, the bulk of Robespierre’s policies were geared towards achieving these principles: voting rights, civil liberties, and equal access to resources. Pegged as the “Defender of the Constitution,” Robespierre recognized the need for a strong document to govern society, limit the scope of political discretion, and cure the corruption generated from arbitrary rule. Max Gallo mentions that Robespierre was always anxious to resort to “constitutional means.”¹⁷² To Robespierre, a constitution was engineered to fulfill a moral purpose. McPhee states that “The Constitution was a delicate balancing act between the king and the legislature.”¹⁷³ Robespierre played a key role in drafting the first written constitution in French history. The Constitution of 1791 was strongly inspired by the American Constitution ratified three years prior in 1788. To Robespierre’s chagrin, the Constitution retained the monarchy, but Louis XVI was no longer an absolute sovereign, he was a functionary of the state. Still, French

¹⁷⁰ Robespierre, “Prospectus for *Le Défenseur de la Constitution*,” trans. Mitch Abidor, Marxists.org, February 1, 2020, <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/robespierre/1792/defence.htm>.

¹⁷¹ Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 77.

¹⁷² Gallo, *The Incorruptible*, 169.

¹⁷³ McPhee, *Liberty or Death*, 131.

revolutionaries argued that there was too much monarchy for a republic.¹⁷⁴ When the National Assembly deliberated on which powers would be vested in Louis XVI in the Constitution of 1791, Robespierre voted to make the king's executive authority as obsolete as possible.¹⁷⁵ He believed that Louis should not have the right to veto any legislation because that would have interfered with the general will. As a legalist, Robespierre saw the separation of powers in its literal form. Sharing power with the king was unacceptable.

The Constitution was meant to authorize powers to the proper bodies. In Robespierre's legal opinion, violation of such measures should be addressed in one form of punishment or another. In regard to the penal system, Robespierre plead for customary disciplinary action. Robespierre said, "the most effective way to repress crimes is to adapt the punishment to the character of the different passions that produce it."¹⁷⁶ Robespierre served as a judge in a criminal court during his blossoming years in Arras. In one case, he was forced to sentence a man to death. Robespierre had not been able to sleep or eat for nearly two days.¹⁷⁷ The prospect of sentencing capital punishment to criminals repulsed Robespierre. No matter how heinous a crime an individual committed, no man has the authority to take his life away. He expressed this same sentiment a few years later in a speech made to the National Assembly in June 1791, Robespierre reasoned that the "death penalty is essentially unjust. . . and that it multiplies crimes more than it creates them."¹⁷⁸ In his view, the death penalty is not a virtuous means to achieve justice. He justified the imposition of the death penalty only if the perpetrator's death was " 'necessary to the safety of individuals

¹⁷⁴ Alfred Cobban, *A History of Modern France, vol. I 1715–1799* (London: Penguin Books, 1957), 185.

¹⁷⁵ Matrat, *Robespierre*, 68.

¹⁷⁶ Robespierre, "On the Death Penalty," trans. Mitch Abidor, Marxists.org, February 1, 2020, <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/robespierre/1791/death-penalty.htm>.

¹⁷⁷ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. I, 39.

¹⁷⁸ Robespierre, "On the Death Penalty."

or society.”¹⁷⁹ An example of a necessary death was the execution of Louis XVI. His survival was a liability. If the Revolutionary Government decided to deport Louis from France, there would have been a high probability of him returning to reclaim his throne. However, Robespierre believed Louis XVI was the exception, not the rule. Further along his speech, Robespierre said:

Outside of civil society, if a bitter enemy makes an attempt on my life, . . . I must either perish or kill him, and the law of natural defense justifies and approves me. But in society, when the force of all is armed against only one, what principles of justice could authorize it to kill him? . . . A victor who kills his captive enemies is called a barbarian.¹⁸⁰

In addition to imposing the death penalty on individuals who jeopardize the safety of society, Robespierre expressed another reason: self-preservation. He asserts the rights of self-defense. He invoked the “law of natural defense” to not only substantiate his point but to buttress it with divine legitimacy. Moreover, Robespierre carried the “big brother” philosophy he practiced as a child who protected vulnerable schoolchildren from bullies. Robespierre’s protection of the oppressed against the oppressor can be applied to a larger scale by replacing the oppressed for citizens and the oppressor for the government. Robespierre strongly opposed governments using their power to impose the death penalty. His legal reasoning always found strength by scoping for moral high ground. Robespierre’s opposition to the death penalty was not a permanent opinion though.

In 1782, the court system in Arras requested Robespierre to become a judge to try criminal cases. This was a formative experience in the shaping of Robespierre’s legal identity because he witnessed the power of the courts to sentence life-altering punishments to errant

¹⁷⁹ McPhee, *Robespierre*, 142.

¹⁸⁰ Robespierre, “On the Death Penalty.”

individuals. In 1793, the Revolutionary Tribunal was established by Georges Danton. The strict purpose of the Tribunal was to pass judgment on individuals accused of being traitors of the Republic. Before the creation of the Revolutionary Tribunals, the French court system was complex and erratic, in terms of adjudication standard and organization of its system. The supreme adjudicator was the monarch.¹⁸¹ Alfred Cobban, a highly praised authority on the French Revolution, published in 1946 his views on Robespierre's sense of justice. Cobban asserts that "Robespierre accepted the need for the terror . . . but irregular executions, indiscriminate massacre, were antipathetic to his legalistic mind." Mass chaos and violence ran rampant during the Revolution, yet Robespierre somewhat contained this disorder by imposing legitimate judicial procedure. As Cobban states, Robespierre "found a formula to justify the application of terroristic justice."¹⁸² Friedrich Sieburg aligns himself with the view on Robespierre's desire to mask violence with judicial procedure. "There was no doubt that Robespierre sought a middle way between the brutality of popular justice and the tedious processes of the ordinary courts of law. The mass killings of September 1792 . . . which Marat enhanced . . . [and] Robespierre had nothing to do with . . . and even criticized [it]. He strove to keep the guillotine as the 'sword of the law'." Judges on the Revolutionary Tribunal were appointed by the Committee of Public Safety, which as a member, permitted Robespierre to exclusively select adjudicators whose opinion would be somewhat already premeditated in his favor.

Criminal laws were ubiquitous because the radical officials of the Convention, led by Robespierre, saw criminals in every corner of the French Republic. Robespierre needed to suppress internal rebellion. In a speech made during his final months, Robespierre declared

¹⁸¹ Cobban, *A History of Modern France*, 30.

¹⁸² Alfred Cobban, "The Political Ideas of Maximilien Robespierre during the Period of the Convention," *The English Historical Review* vol. 61, no. 239 (1946), 57–59.

that “social protection is due only to peaceful citizens; there are no citizens in the Republic but republicans. The royalists, the conspirators. . . are enemies.”¹⁸³ Fear-mongering was often used as a strategy by Robespierre in order to quicken the passage of legislation. Legalized violence was a defining feature of the Revolution. “The new thing after September 1793 was that terror was organized and became for the first time a deliberate policy of the government.”¹⁸⁴ Violence was not a novel aspect of French culture before 1793, however the National Convention’s decision to legislate it into official laws was an act entirely indicative of an unprecedented reign. As the leader of the Convention, Robespierre used laws to spell out his fears and paranoias. Some of these prominent pieces of legislation included the Law of Suspects and Law of 22nd Prairial. The objective of these laws was to ensure the safety of the nascent French Republic. George Rudé notes that Robespierre’s idea of justice was “swift and merciless [and] it must be applied only according to the letter of the law.”¹⁸⁵ The Law of Suspects, as the label self-explains, was legislation passed by the National Convention on September 17, 1793 to legally define suspects of counter-revolutionary conduct. Suspects were defined as:

- I. Partisans of tyranny and federalism
- II. Ex-nobles and their relatives who have not shown loyalty to the Republic
- III. Dismissed public officials
- IV. Those to whom certificates of civism have been denied
- V. Returned emigrants who fled after the Revolution¹⁸⁶

The strengths of the law were evident. The law showed state action against enemies that may

¹⁸³ Bienvenu, *Ninth of Thermidor*, 39.

¹⁸⁴ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 56.

¹⁸⁵ Rudé, *Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat*, 118.

¹⁸⁶ Sirich, *The Revolutionary Committee in the Departments of France, 1793–1794*, 44.

threaten the safety of the citizens; however, the weakness of the law is that it vested too much discriminatory power on police officers. It also showed the discrimination of the state government against even the slightest hint of opposition can render them the grave title enemy of the state. On June 10, 1794, Robespierre delivered the Law of 22nd Prairial. The sixth and seventh articles of the law expressly expand the definition of counterrevolutionary conduct as well as the sentencing imposed on them if captured and convicted. Article X defined enemies of the state as those who. . .

- I. Sought to disparage or dissolve the National Convention
- II. Inspire discouragement
- III. Mislead opinion
- IV. Impair the energy and the purity of revolutionary and republican principles.

Additionally, Article XII stated that the penalty for these offences under the jurisdiction of the Revolutionary Tribunal is death.¹⁸⁷ As a member of the Committee of Public Safety, Robespierre's number one concern was the safety of the Republic. This Law was an extra safeguard to the Law of Suspects. Robespierre's function for the Law was not just safety; it was specific and punitive. Instead of defending the Republic, he is actively using the Law to eliminate potential enemies. Furthermore, Article seven destroyed any possibility for a sentence that does not lead to death. The Law of 22nd Prairial Robespierre would drastically curtail the rights of the accused. On June 10, 1794, Robespierre drafted the Law of 22nd Prairial in a partnered effort with Public Safety comrade, Couthon. The function of this law expedited trials heard by Revolutionary Tribunals by limiting prisoners' ability to defend themselves. It also suspended judicial action in the provinces, transferring all cases for trial in

¹⁸⁷ McPhee, *Liberty or Death*, 264.

Paris. Prisons in the city overflowed as a result with forty official prisons holding nearly 8,000 suspected revolutionaries.¹⁸⁸ In theory, Robespierre designed the law to weed out traitors of the Republic. Yet, the enforcement of the Prairial law was a blatant violation of due procedural rights protected by the Declaration of Rights of Man of the Constitution. Proper and timely justice was sacrificed for expediency and simplification of the judicial process.

Economic legislation was less violent but equally stringent. Financial distress caused the eruption of popular unrest. Robespierre needed to implement economic reforms to prove his commitment to quell social agitation. In Robespierre's legal opinion, "shortages can only be imputed to the vices of administrations. . . bad laws. . . and bad morals."¹⁸⁹ Robespierre's legal economic strategy was to increase state intervention on commerce in order to reduce shortages. Furthermore, Robespierre believed that "bad morals" were the aggravating factors of a starving nation. Therefore, Robespierre approved the passage of the General Maximum laws whereby overpricing bread was regarded as an anti-revolutionary act. The first law passed by the Convention 1793 was imposed to...

- I. put price controls on food
- II. put price controls on tobacco
- III. fine anyone who sold goods above the maximum
- IV. list violators as suspects of counterrevolution.¹⁹⁰

In a society that experienced food crises on a regular basis, Robespierre intended for the General Maximum to regulate the economy in order to accomplish a public good. Price controls prevented any capitalist ambitions; however, it also increased state interference in

¹⁸⁸ Thompson, *Robespierre*, vol. II, 194.

¹⁸⁹ Robespierre speech, "On Subsistence Goods."

¹⁹⁰ Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 252.

private commerce. R. R. Palmer interprets the law as the attempt of the Committee of Public Safety to “conduct a planned economy more thoroughgoing than anything seen in Europe until the twentieth century.”¹⁹¹ Robespierre recognized that bad laws contribute to man-made shortages; therefore as a legalist, his natural plan of action was to create affirmative laws that dictated the economy towards a public benefit, that being enough bread for everyone. However, once these economic laws and criminal laws were applied, the intended benefits were eclipsed by the detrimental consequences of the law.

Motivated to guarantee lasting justice and security to the French Republic, Robespierre was committed to write, enforce, and uphold the law in constitutional, penal, judicial, economic, and criminal affairs. As a legislator of a democracy, Robespierre crafted laws to protect man’s inalienable right to their life, liberty, and property from undue government infringement. As the Revolution intensified into the Reign of Terror, Robespierre’s relationship with the law became less altruistic and more punitive. Through the passage of draconian laws such as the Law of Prairial, which curtailed due procedure for the accused, Robespierre’s commitment to revolutionary justice signified the end of individual liberties.

¹⁹¹ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 227.

Conclusion

Throughout the French Revolution, Robespierre presented a spectrum of identities—liberal democrat, tyrannical dictator, puritanical utopian, and the people’s lawyer. The last two identities, in particular, challenge interpretations that reduce him to either a popular hero or bloodthirsty villain in French history. On the one hand, R. R. Palmer’s *Twelve Who Ruled* stresses Robespierre’s authoritarian tendencies. Palmer argues that “to many Frenchmen the government seemed to be the worst enemy. In supporting it they would only encourage a body of men whose principles they detested, . . . persecuted their religion, disrupted their business, and made their property insecure.”¹⁹² Robespierre’s hand in inciting state-sponsored violence, suspension of basic civil liberties, and forceful imposition of his will on France are aspects that cement his legacy as an anti-democratic villain. On the other hand, George Rudé’s *Robespierre: Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat* claims that “Robespierre was the recognized champion of popular sovereignty and the people’s ‘liberties,’ rights, and aspirations.”¹⁹³ A third group of Robespierre scholars consist of the conciliators—the historians who attempt to neither glorify nor vilify the man. Twenty-first century historians lead this group, among them being Peter McPhee. McPhee states that Robespierre has been drawn “preposterous parallels. . . with Mao, Pol Pot, and even Stalin and Hitler.”¹⁹⁴ McPhee urges that Robespierre should not be personified as the Jacobin dictatorship, but instead, he should “rather be understood as a young man, as uncertain about the future as he was exhilarated by its possibilities.”¹⁹⁵ To Max Gallo, Robespierre was a lonely and depressed man who constructed dreams in order to escape hostile reality. These

¹⁹² Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 56–57.

¹⁹³ Rude, *Portrait of a Revolutionary Democrat*, 193.

¹⁹⁴ McPhee, Robespierre, xvii.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, xviii.

interpretations acknowledge that Robespierre could be viewed in a variety of shades, which give rise to other facets of his character such as utopian and lawyer.

What helps explain this identity crisis? First, France from 1792–1794 suffered from wars between republicans and royalists both on a domestic and international scale. To resolve this crisis as expediently as possible, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety invoked their emergency wartime powers to mobilize the nation and deploy assets to where it was needed most. Under such a circumstance, Robespierre's increasing authority saw the coalescence of executive, legislative, and judicial powers. "If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, a major revolution it is at the same time both virtue and terror."¹⁹⁶ In Robespierre's speech, conduct during a revolution was distinctly different from conduct during peacetime. Confronted by war, Robespierre was often driven by paranoia rather than reason. In Robespierre's world, the forfeiture of his democratic identity was therefore justified, and the debut of his dictatorship lauded.

Moreover, Robespierre was not as 'Incorruptible' as he wished to be. Pressured to achieve perfection, he cracked under its immense weight—a weight that he never had the strength to carry but was too ambitious to admit so. John Laurence Carr argues in *Robespierre: The Force of Circumstances*, that "no man can have revolution on his own terms, even if he is in charge of it. The one and only constant in any revolutionary context is the fact of change."¹⁹⁷ In a speech to the National Convention in 1794, Robespierre said that the "French are the first people of the world who have established real democracy."¹⁹⁸ There were not many precedents of a democratic institution in 1789. There was no revolutionary handbook or code of ethics to help guide Robespierre's construction of the new French regime. Still,

¹⁹⁶ Bienvenu, *Ninth of Thermidor*, 38.

¹⁹⁷ Carr, *Force of Circumstances*, 192.

¹⁹⁸ Bienvenu, *Ninth of Thermidor*, 35.

ignorance may not excuse the Reign of Terror. Max Gallo finds that “Maximilien was a performer both by nature and by necessity.”¹⁹⁹ Robespierre tested different roles in order to assess their effectiveness during an unprecedented time. Robespierre as a “performer” masks as much as it reveals.

Who was Maximilien Robespierre, the real man behind the performer? Democrat, dictator, utopian, or lawyer? The simple answer is he presented all of these personas. Although, the mere presentation of such identities is not a confirmation of his true self. In historiographical terms, historians search for the true identity of Robespierre, but they often engage with his theatrical façade, the façade that cannot be separated from the tide of the Revolution, particularly the violence of the Reign of Terror. Robespierre, the “performer” played all four roles—democrat, dictator, utopian, and lawyer—throughout his lifetime. Yet, it is the historian’s inevitable task/burden? to impose their subjectivity on past historical figures. It becomes a reflection of their current circumstances. Therefore, Robespierre is viewed as a performer because historians create the roles he plays.

Earlier I referenced the Rashomon Effect as the underlying philosophy of my thesis. One event can be remembered in a variety of lights. One individual’s recollection of the event may spur fondness, a second individual may recall the event as somber, and a third individual may interpret it with indifference. It remains difficult to reconcile conflicting perspectives. Truth is a fluid concept. The slightest difference makes all the difference when arriving to the truth, and thus, truth can never be absolute, no matter how tirelessly we try to project it as. It has been over two hundred years since the head of Robespierre rolled off the blood-soaked guillotined. Why is his significance still a concern? The art of history lies in

¹⁹⁹ Gallo, *The Incorruptible*, 124.

continuous revision. Historians will continue to ask, “Who was Maximilien Robespierre?” A historical figure will continue to inhabit contemporary consciousness. “Who was Robespierre?” becomes “Who is Robespierre?”

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